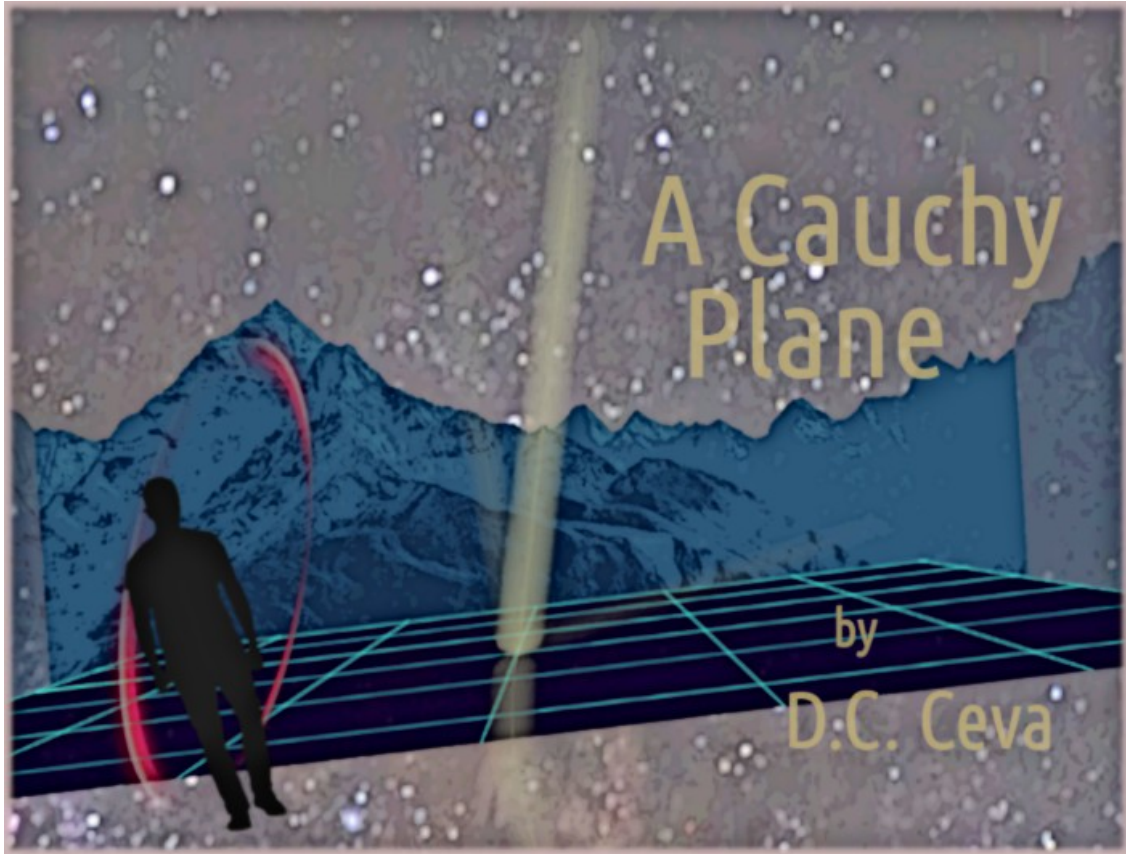


A Cauchy Plane



by D.C. Ceva

‘It’s okay. It’s okay.’

Aiden looks straight into his eyes. Physically they are separated by almost two arms’ length, but it feels, now and here, as if they almost touch, their eyes. There is nothing but his eyes, and all the

white around, some of it reflecting in them, and he is sure it's the same for him. Nothing but those eyes, and the strain. The terrible strain. Aiden knows it's only a matter of seconds until his strength will cease.

'It's okay,' he hears him saying. 'It's okay. Let go.'

'You're deflecting. Again.'

'And you're not listening. As usual.'

Miller sighed, snatched her pack of Chesterfields off the desk, fingered one out impatiently, and slumped back, throwing the pack back on the desk. A puff of smoke obscured her nose like mountain fog for a moment. That nose.

'Sure I'm listening. I could recite it by now.'

'Then you still don't believe me.'

'By the sounds of it you're not quite sure yourself. Doubt. Might be one for my team?'

Aiden felt they had been here a thousand times. Almost funny, for the thousandth time.

'Maybe all the others are right, too. Some of them. Ever thought of that?'

'No. And yours is a first-timer. No one else before you with that one.'

'Are you even supposed to tell me that?'

'I'm not telling you anything, I'm saying what's not. Can we get back on topic, please.'

'What is the topic?'

'Grief. Trauma. The loss of your friend. Guilt.'

'Guilt? Am I feeling guilty?'

'There's some of that, usually, yes. Might not feel that way. And guilt itself is an attempt. The first. And we're nowhere near it yet.'

'You think I'm making this up.'

'In simple terms, yes.'

'Then what am I doing here...'

'And there we are again with that one.'

'Well, excuse me for talking in circles.'

Miller put a brief but wide sarcastic smile on her face. Smoking wasn't permitted, but then it was her joint. With him she made an exception, and they both knew why. Honesty. Contrary to popular belief it's rare in offices like this. The first time she'd asked him whether there'd been anything at all about the session he'd liked, and he'd responded that he liked her nose. It had neither sounded like an insult nor a compliment, and he hadn't tried to come on to her either. She'd learned more about him from that remark than during the entire session.

'Self-deprecating humour. I like that. You're here on your own free will, remember? You wouldn't tell me about your theory and expect me to just buy it. I'm not the right address for that. And I think that matters. You're coming to me. Not..., I don't know, a particle physicist?'

'Mathematician.'

'If that suffices.'

'I already got one for that.'

'And let me guess. You're not being direct with him either, are you.'

'Her. And no. Not yet.'

'So... Just seeing if I got this straight. You're not telling your mathematician about your theory, and you're not telling me about what's troubling you the most, what's at the heart of this, but you're telling me about your theory. Does that mean I should confer with your mathematician about your mental problems? Are you going to the fire brigade to have your hair cut and tell them to send the barber in case your apartment is on fire?'

'You're supposed to listen to me. It's too early to just come out with it. I learn from her, by inferring. With you, I'm supposed to be able to talk about everything. Everything.'

'As long as it helps us to progress with getting to the bottom of what's wrong.'

'The only thing I want from you right now is to consider, just bloody *consider* that it's one and the same thing. I mean..., begin with trying to imagine what it'd be *like*.'

'I have. Believe it or not. Part of the playbill. Give me some credit. And I'm not sitting here for the heck of it. I have experience, and novel format or not, the architecture of what I see is all too familiar. It's not so special what I'm dealing here with you. And it begins with denial.'

'Isn't the session over already?'

'Try and see it from my perspective. The shrink's. Even if what you claim was true. Even if it was even more outlandish, and it was still true. There's still the little issue of you watching your friend die. You will agree, that'll leave an impression, no matter what. That'll have consequences. I'm not a mathematician. I'm here for those consequences.'

'Denial of what? You heard the whole story from *me*. Detail by detail. Because it's the details that matter. So tell me, what exactly am I denying? That it was my fault? It was, partly. That I could have prevented it? Probably. So, what then?'

'That it's painful. Still. That the pain never ceased. That it never even eased. And that you should admit the possibility that you had to construct an elaborate theory to explain it. To make sense of it, while trying to escape that pain. Nothing new about that either. Preoccupy yourself with something you can never solve. Works just as well as workaholism.'

'The two are separate. One event, dwarfed by another.'

'Are they, though? Because if I remember correctly, it's when everything started.'

There were certain trigger points, when she knew she got through to him. Made him shudder. He for his part knew this, too, and he knew that she knew he did. Damned smartasses. They made for the toughest nuts.

'Tell me. What's your success rate? What's harder to treat in the end, the real loonies, or the ones for whom the problem is really reality?'

'Each have their perks and quirks.'

'But you never *really* consider it, do you. Someone comes in here, say, saying they have nightmares about nuclear Armageddon, every single night. What you tell them? Let's focus on your personal problems? How is the end of the world not anyone's personal problem?'

'It is. And it begins before the reality of it. It begins with the fear becoming permanent.'

'But ultimately they're right to be afraid, aren't they. It's less crazy than not to be. What's your cure, personally removing all the nukes?'

'But that has even less to do with why you're here, has it. Deflection, again.'

'It's the same if I'm right.'

'I'll mark the *if* as progress. I'm an optimist.'

'Damn all of those. And you were wrong just before.'

'How so?'

'I don't know if it was then when it began. How could I? And how could it? Only thing I know is it's when I started to become aware of it.'

If everything had been the way it was supposed to be it would have been easy to set such a marker. 'When it had started.' 'When he had started.' Thinking in what he by now regarded as conventional thinking, it would have started some time after. But violently, loudly, directly, in clarity, a clarity he should have seen as his much earlier, if he hadn't, the subject matter was complicated in terms of words. That he eventually did connect the dots had put him on the right trajectory precisely because he could see this trajectory: why him? Or better, how? Not so much how him and not others as well, that came later in the list of priorities, just the How. It had started off the journey down the rabbit hole of theoretical physics.

After the in more than one way exhausting session with Miller Adrien had returned home to his tiny apartment that increasingly looked as if he'd just moved in in every way but one. The kitchen was never used except for preparing meals and brewing more coffee, the kitchen table was designated food storage, both chairs had been recruited for hanging up items higher up in the bedroom/office. As with the kitchen and bathroom, the bedroom's furnishing was sparse. Gone everything he didn't need, including anything to make it nicer. A mattress, a wardrobe, and a small couch. The centre of this small universe was actually in the corner by the window, his desk, a wobbly, limited affair with

a square desktop, and besides the couch, which was already barely visible under the debris of papers, items of clothing, batteries, computer-parts and what's just known as stuff, it was on the desk where all the action was. And on the walls.

Upon entering, a visitor's view may have first fallen on the poster of a Boy's Surface on the wall beyond the desk, if anyone would indeed come knocking. The long wall opposite the desk was nearly plastered over with the bulk of it, the past- and future cones above and below the hypersurface dominating between newspaper clippings, enigmatic diagrams and those equations he'd managed to kind of understand a little. Aiden had no need for red twine. He knew where everything was.

The question of How, how he could have become aware at all, and quickly leading to the larger How, or Hows, as the largest of them could only be tackled by finding solutions for the ones describing the phenomenon as it was already established. How could it be local, if it was. How could it be universal if it wasn't. Importantly, what was its limits, its volume, where did it connect. Once he figured that out he could have a chance for a crack on the more personal aspects, the how come he knew, how come no one else seemed to, and to what degree the human thought had to be a part of everything affected, everything, that is, which was essentially the How of his awareness. Most of the time. At others he thought it could be the other way round, first crack the stuff you're actually experiencing, then use that to tackle the big questions. Throughout all of it another How began to emerge, the How to keep it together. How to remain focused, to make progress, not to become hopelessly confused. It wasn't just the conflict between what wanted to be more important at one time, or the immense difficulty of the subject matter for someone who was decisively *not* a theoretical physicist. It was also the stress. The stress *it* was causing. The stress not to know, still not, when the Connect would happen. And whether he'd know anything after.

At least for the problem of not being a theoretical physicist, not a physicist of any kind, and with years of study in between him and that, of him having to learn all the basics now as an adult, at least for sucking at even knowing how to do what he'd set out to do, he had found a solution: help. Sesha wasn't online, and she hadn't left any messages since the last. She was four hours ahead, but it was unlikely that she was already in bed. He was terribly tempted to write, but he'd exhausted his questions for the day, had to do his homework on the answers, and he'd written out a demand to himself on the inside of his eyelids as a mantra, not to overdo it with her, to restrict himself to subject-related exchange. Across the gulf of virtual space the wrong ideas could easily percolate, misinterpretations in the absence of a face to read were a common danger.

For how long had he known Sesha?

He'd found her after invading a message board of undergraduates that was part of a data- and idea swapping platform between students of her university and two Californian ones. That's how he'd thought of himself, as an invader. He hadn't belonged there. His formal education had ended when he'd left his boarding school. He'd picked the site because it operated outside those universities, had been launched independently by the students, and after he'd singled out Sesha from the meagre replies to his fake appeal he'd not visited it again. He'd explained this choice to her, this feeling of intruding, and to his dismay she had not offered an objection.

But she was the deal. She was on the fence, between theoretical and practical work, and she'd reacted with enthusiasm to his purport of writing a science fiction screenplay. Every time a writer will consult an actual physicist to get this stuff right, she'd said, is a win. Even if it's 'just' a student. The first thing he'd learned from her was that he'd been right. 'This stuff' was hard. He hadn't known how hard. Sesha was patient. And understanding. Aiden believed that she could become an excellent teacher one day. Only that she wouldn't, if things stayed as they were.

He poured himself a Johnny Black. You're doing great. It's your first today. Though not really. This today, perhaps, yes. It's not only complicated. It's quirky.

He'd finish the glass, pour himself another, he didn't see the need to fight this part of it, and commence. Making up his mind about the angle. The larger Hows were winning. Yes. Topography.

'It's okay. It's okay.'

The strain. It's too much. Already beyond what's possible. It's inevitable, and they can see it in each others' eyes, so close, as if nearly touching, even though they aren't. Only those eyes.

'Let go. It's okay.'

But he won't. He can't. And if he dies himself. He will not. Until he will.

When he'd first learned James' name he'd kept himself from saying what he thought.

'I know. Makes me sound so upper class. The fucked up thing, I am. You know. Can't pick from whom you'll slip out.'

It'd be like this between them from then on. Knowing, sometimes vaguely, sometimes precisely, what the other one was thinking. Mostly it was James saying it out loud, though. Their major difference, James was an outtrovert. It was true what he'd said with those first words to him, he came from a rich family. Aiden would never meet his parents, and by the fact that James mostly avoided talking about them altogether he gathered that things weren't too rosy between them and their son. It was his guess whether his new friend's confidence was the result from having been brought up without economic worries, or if he'd have been the same swashbuckler had he spent a childhood between coal mine and a row of identical grey residencies. The other major difference between them. James was fearless.

Aiden had met Erica first, through Jamie, but only one time, and there'd been talk about 'her boyfriend', but without the name dropping. Remarkable, he'd thought later, though that first encounter between the three of them had been brief, she'd been with two female friends and had come over to say long time no seen to Jamie. She'd sat down for a minute, and most of what she'd said was lost on Aiden, who'd been primarily impressed that Jamie had some outclassing acquaintances after all. He knew her from sec school, Jamie volunteered after she'd returned to her entourage, which Aiden decided the two snub noses were. It had begun to rain slightly, the drops were being moved across the window by little gusts as if it was a wind shield, and the small pavilion café on the pier had rapidly filled, it had felt kind of cosy, the way a power outage in a public space could feel. Which, in retrospect, was a little odd.

Jamie hadn't met James either yet, who at that point still remained 'the boyfriend', and other than as a ghostly shadow he would thus not feature in their conversations about Erica, of which there were some, two or three, perhaps four, until they'd bump into her again at the Stray God, alongside James. Aiden had tried not to appear too curious when he steered the barque to the topic of her the second time, but Jamie noticed, saying he'd give him a piece of good advice, but would first have to follow it himself. At the time Aiden and Jamie had gotten into the habit of turning up at the same cheap seafront breakfast café every time they'd reach a morning in company, having coffee and flappy croissants, and it was by then happening often enough for them to watch the season turning, the Erica talks took place when it was still dark at their arrival.

'She's got something, all right. Wouldn't win a wet bikini contest, but that's because of the probable audience.'

Aiden had agreed. Sexy is not the looks. It's not the dress code, and it certainly isn't tons of make-up, or the worrying rising trend of shaving off precious pubic hair because everyone was a secret porn critique and the unison opinion all the sudden appeared to be that all men had to be fucking paedophiles. Sexy lay in the behaviour, more precisely, the absent of any. Sexy was being natural. Which predictably brought on Jamie's template litany about how much he hated the conventional games that made everything so complicated.

'I don't look at you, dream on, baby boy, as if you were my class. Go on, goggle at me, drool. Let's make sure he does. He doesn't? How dare this little punk!'

'Give it a rest. It's insecurity.'

'Exactly. Since when is that appealing? Sure, when a boy is insecure, that's a reason for a laugh. It's not easier for us, man, it's not easier.'

'Is it any easier with Erica? If anything, she's more intimidating.'

'Well, she's got a boyfriend, so that's academic. And that means that the boyfriend wasn't intimidated, so...'

Aiden had wanted to keep the conversation academic, he was big on learning, but sharing a crush is awkward, and he'd only seen her once. Best he could do was trying to keep it light, light and insecure, which are the ingredients of what's known as locker room talk.

'Safe to say she doesn't shave in any case.'

'Please, man. I'm eating. Never mix a snack with talk about pussy. Bound to end with pastry tasting like fish.'

'You two boys alright?'

They'd never bothered to learn what the place was called, but had decided the woman serving there every morning was a Margot or Margaret, and Margot or Margaret had sneaked up on them, pretending to wipe the tables, and her question had sounded Teutonic.

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Perfectly alright. Excellent coffee.'

Maybe she didn't like them because they were the only ones making her work at this hour, maybe she didn't like them just so, maybe it was her way of a months' slow approach. She shot Aiden a look for the compliment and sauntered off back to the counter.

'This thing tastes like fish no matter what.'

'It's the ocean's proximity.'

'That right. You picture Margot sailing out fishing for croissants in the wee hours. Anyway. She sure doesn't shave her armpits.'

'Who, Margot?'

'Erica, dope.'

'There you go.'

'No. There I don't go. I don't believe in breaking into relationships, and neither should you.'

'I suppose that's the good advice.'

'Damn right.'

'Well, rest assured. I don't either, and I'm much too insecure as well.'

'The Lethargic Duo. Way to go.'

Aiden would think back on their lurid talk that morning he couldn't date. It stood out because they normally had other subjects. Music, frequently. Books, Jamie was a sheer fanatic, he read everything, could get lost in the pages of an ornithological work, literally, he'd once caught him neck-deep into 'Ring Ouzels of the Highlands'. Basically no topic was off, however. Their routine of accidentally waking through the night in a town with no more than two options to do so, to then spend the rest walking the beach and put a finishing to it at this odd, unappealing place, was young, and with talk being continuous throughout they'd have, would they've had any reason for it, concluded that this was a friendship. A young, budding friendship that had fallen into place organically in a way only luck or providence could provide, and neither of them believed in the latter. Which was another recurring subject, superstitions and religion. Hard to believe that two people with the same attitude towards one subject could find this much nuance in it to keep the conversation going perpetually. Would it be more precise to call ourselves agnostics, since we both admit that we cannot prove a negative. No, because the measure counts, and it's not just that we don't see evidence for the existence of the supernatural, a deity, angels and demons, or the immaculate birth, we both don't even see the slightest *hint* pointing at the possibility, meanwhile the overwhelming belief in it is itself easily explained.

Neither of them were academics, Jamie had some limited success in his awkward stand-ups because the audience didn't get that the awkwardness was real, but had someone eavesdropped on their nightly debates, especially their morning periods, they could certainly have guessed them to be graduates. After the rift between them had established itself with James' entering the stage he'd sometimes recalled all this, despite it having been hard to gaze across the light, favourably comparing their many enriching debates with that one morning of boy talk. Which, in honesty, had surprised them both, and the real shadow had been Erica at that point.

Who'd turn up at Jamie's next gig at the Stray God, as it turned out, and Aiden could see that it made his friend nervous. He was always nervous about bombing, now he'd know someone in the

audience whom he wanted to impress, whether he wanted to want or not. Erica crashed into them like a Mediterranean comet as they'd stood at the pointless but decorative twirled column by the wall reserved for those who preferred standing at the plain ledge hammered into it at average nipple height for their drinks, and Aiden knew Jamie would have a hard evening at work. After announcing what was obvious in the present moment, that she was there and that she'd would see him do his thing, finally, she managed to make it worse, by adding 'we, actually', and that she was there with 'my man', and she instantly began to wave and shout him over. Now Jamie not only had to perform for the girl he fancied, but also the male she, for now, preferred over him. What could go wrong. He'd been assigned to get them both drinks, and he presently appeared, erect, and already shining, with two identical long drinks in his hands, both containing Coke. Which is when Erica introduced him.

'I know. Makes me sound so upper class. *James*. And you know what's fucked up? I am. What can I say. Can't pick from whom you're pulled.'

Aiden didn't know whether he liked those words. But he already liked James. He held himself gracefully without having to put effort into it, and that would easily take a few years off until he'd be about fifty, even though he'd retained a good amount of baby fat that rounded his jaw bones, and though it did not yet bulge out a belly, a tendency for later obesity was there for him to fight. Aiden did not imagine James would fight it enthusiastically. He seemed untroubled. He didn't mind that he'd already managed to soil his right cuff, he wore both of them open, and he walked as if across the planks of a swaying ship or yacht, and it was his, he'd learned to keep his balance. He had swag. And he had wide open eyes, a child's eyes that wanted to gobble up everything, and his mature baritone clashed deliciously with them, like a pair of berries in a stag served with opulent sides and garnishes. Aiden would subsequently wonder whether it was possible for a man to fall in love with another man without being gay, in a non-sexual, platonic way. Or if it needed another name when the word friendship was just not enough. Jamie and he had debated love, of course. Starting with listing all the aspects that were in their opinion mostly misrepresented, it was mortal, not everlasting, could in fact be killed quite easily, there were bugs and beetles more resistant to a squashing thumb or boot, if it was sweet then it was just because of the sugar coating, and the chef who'd concocted this desert had earned his joint no more than a single star, probably less, you don't glaze bitter leafs with anything sweet, and least of all it was knowing. You fall in love, and the subject of your affection ought to be counted as the person you know least in the world. Only up to here it was already a blind, dumb, fake, frail thing hiding everything that's important to know when meeting a fellow member of one's apex predator species. Next it had more in common with addiction than anything that could be called a blessing. If supply was steady, and if the substance was clean, one could lead a long, healthy life with it, and one would always see it in the light that breaks through the clouds as those picturesque beams. The couples who manage to grow old together have in another the equivalence of pure, uncut heroin, provided by the lucky equivalence of being each others' pushers. But take the beloved, the spouse, the other away, by break-up or death, you'll go straight into withdrawal, and the symptoms are right on the dot. The expression 'I need you' is accurate. You'd been living a more or less stable life, then you got hooked, and now the absence of your drug is causing you physical pain, you won't eat, you won't sleep, you try to combat the symptoms with other drugs, and you're holding your cramping belly as you stumble towards the cliff. Finally, the equating of sex and love. The sexual act was being called love-making. Could be, the image was that of tender, sensual intercourse and caressing. Tough domination and submission games, slapping, hard fucking and everything falling under 'kink' and 'perverted' didn't seem to fit the term 'love-making', even though what these acts ultimately expressed could very well be the same. Of course all of this and much else was also possible without the background of any affection beyond basic attraction. People couldn't even agree on which one was better. It seemed to Jamie and Aiden, as they took care not to admit to each other that they were feeling as if back in puberty as they discussed it, that if sex was necessary to keep a pair in love with another, well then it was an even more brittle thing. And if it did work regardless

of the sex, say with an old couple where one or both had lost their enthusiasm for it, you could still not know whether it was because they had simply gotten used to another.

Unreliable, was their verdict. Both declared there and then that they'd take friendship over love any time. Not to mean that friendship was solid by guarantee. Friendship could go the same way, especially when love entered the game, a third, destabilising element on a pair of legs, lighting a cigarette and pretending not to want anyone to look at her. But overall more robust, and more lucid. Seeing the other's flaws, and accepting them. Friendship is not a thing that happens on first sight, however. The longing for it can, but it needs to be established before it can be named.

Aiden didn't feel longing when first setting eyes on James. It was more like a reunion. Something he'd lost in early childhood and hadn't noticed he was missing, until now. An iconic piece. Iconic pieces, in Aiden's museum of the numinous, was stuff that had to be there, had to exist. Pieces of music one definitely hears for the first time, realising that a universe without them would be unthinkable. Movie scenes that revealed themselves as already being classic while watching them. Things one feels one had known all along, even though one had never encountered them before. And Aiden had never met James, not even unknowingly, in passing. Nothing could be established between them, and nothing was. So what else to call it but love? After all, it was all still first impressions.

James handed Erica her drink, and thankfully they didn't bill and coo, but Jamie's discomfort was palpable.

'Which of you two is the jester? You are.'

'Correct. And the jester has to get ready.'

'You're not on right away, are you?' Erica had let a second's worth split crease her brow. 'I mean, you're not opening.'

'Heavens, no. Just, I can't jump onto the stage from here, need some time in quiet. I'll see you guys after. Don't boo.'

'He's nervous.'

'So would I be. Can't see myself up there. I bomb just with friends over.'

'He's right. He's terrible at telling jokes.'

'Jokes? I came for Punch and Judy.'

'See?'

'And I'm great at jokes. Vacancy!'

A comfy sitting group of a short leather couch and armchair right at the stage had been vacated, and the three hurried to conquer it. Aiden thought that this would be common with James, seats all over the world would be free for him. The Stray God was predominantly a cellar bar, but with a wide array of seating separated by much space in a half dozen rooms, and the furniture had been assembled from bulky waste Wednesdays, or so it looked, and one of the rooms was outfitted for cinema nights by means of a white sheet and a projector, the other one with a low stage for concerts and other performances. The stand-up evenings were a regular event, and Jamie had been invited back after having had a success here, a performance Aiden had seen. Altogether he'd seen Jamie performing thrice, and only one of the other gigs had been a rather lukewarm success. But the Stray God crowd remembered him, and it wouldn't have been exaggerated to call this one the most prestigious event of this kind in town.

'Aiden. Where you two know each other from?'

'We've only met once the other day. Jamie's the one knowing her.'

'I meant you and Jamie.'

'Oh. I can't really recall when we first spoke. We've been around for quite some time, both of us.'

'Must be like birth.'

'What must?'

'Not remembering how something started. A friendship?'

'You don't always know when it'll be a friendship, do you.'

James smiled and took a sip. He'd keep his eyes on the ones he spoke to, would not avert them if a tractor fell out of the sky and came crashing down behind him.

‘Tomorrow’s Saturday, what you do with your Saturdays?’
‘Sleeping in? Long breakfast? Haven’t really planned anything, why?’
‘Rica and I are going out to Goblin’s Cave, looking for octopus. Ses.’
‘Octopi?’ Erica tried to help.
‘Is it? I never know. You wanna come?’
‘There are octopuses at Goblin’s Cave?’
‘I wouldn’t know before trying to find some. Us four, will be fun.’
‘If Jamie’s up for it...’
‘And if he won’t?’
‘I’m game. Sure.’

It pleased Aiden to see that this pleased James. His smile could have indicated the end of a rich, tasty meal, or a deal done. They more survived than followed the first act of the evening, which was suitable more for an open mic night and consisted mostly of personal story-telling, with a few jokes bellyflopping and receiving the worst reaction possible, politeness. The second act was not much better, a straight up stand-up, but terribly prepared, and when Aiden looked he saw that Erica was gone, before he spotted her on a couch behind them, engaged in conversation with yet another female friend.

‘This town. Ninety-five percent mediocre. With luck.’

Actually Aiden agreed with this. It was just that he’d come to accept it.

‘No real theatre,’ James continued, looking as if he suffered from it, ‘a few bands to speak of, and they all leave. More bands to better not speak of, and they’re the ones staying. The university is crap, the cinemas are crap, except one, they barely have discovered the meaning of the word *café*. It’s all superficial. If it wasn’t for the scenery, I’d be long gone.’

‘Where’d you go?’

‘Finding out where, of course. Whole planet to search. You have ambitions?’

‘Full confession: no. You?’

‘Sure. Just don’t know them yet.’

‘But you’re a student.’

‘Hell, no. Rica is. Hence I know. Our friend Jamie’s on.’

Aiden threw a look back to see whether Erica paid attention. He couldn’t imagine anything worse than Jamie seeing her ignoring him on stage while her boyfriend was following his every word. She didn’t, disengaged from the babble with her friend and flashing him a teeth-full of ‘exciting’. And the three of them and dozens of cardboard-like shadows were watching Jamie go down in flames.

The question of topography interested Aiden vastly. To him it felt of even greater importance than awareness or the lack thereof. It’s where everything had to start. The big one.

It was also double-bladed. There was temporal topography, designed to give him headaches, and there was literal topography, the question whether a bubble, for lack of better imagination, was in any way plausible. In short, did it affect only his region, did it affect Earth, was the solar system caught, or was the situation universal. Cautiously, with a lot of Ifs attached, he’d already come out at one end. As with everything else, he also thought he’d spent way too much time on achieving this.

The logic went like this: if it was regional, regional referring to anything within the universe and therefore smaller, but particularly a range small enough to be observed, differences in occurrences outside the restrictive limits of the event as imagined as a bubble that weren’t subject to strong gravity or relativistic speeds should be registered in observation, and although Aiden’s species had gone a way and keeping the skies and thus the past under surveillance by means of both ground- and space-based telescopes nothing of the kind was being registered, and the idea of a global conspiracy between all nations, some of which were in open conflict with another, was too absurd to be even considered. Naturally there was a limit to what was sufficiently observable, the frame was still small, strictly speaking, and further out a lot had always been observed that seemed odd, ever since it was possible.

If the frame was purposefully tightened even more the problem with the event occurring only locally became the more apparent. A comparison between how specific events unfolded within, say, the solar system, if solely affected, and with how they did outside it would not only be possible, it would make the headlines of all newspapers; after all, this was not about mere moments, it was persistent. Continuing to constrict the area of influence, and matters may have slipped the attention of those best equipped to register and measure them, but would be more apparent to him. He did know of people who'd left the country, for example, spending a vacation somewhere, and come back, and nothing seemed out of the ordinary. So it didn't seem to affect only a region encompassing the country, the county, his city, or his neighbourhood, although he was frightened to leave it.

The counter-indicative arguments had been at hand immediately, and it was them that already made these most basic speculations so terribly frustrating. For once, he had to admit that his rather conventional thinking might not at all apply. Talk of other dimensions was easily made, and in the absence of knowing anything about them it could only be vague, but he couldn't just declare it impossible that one may unwittingly cross a crack beyond which conditions would be what his kind could only perceive as abnormal, if they only knew, he couldn't, not just because it didn't fit his thoughts. Still, one of those things, those bubbles, just lying around for people to stumble into seemed a little out there.

At other times more important seemed the issue of duration, was *the* decisive one, and in its context the regionally constricted event became particularly implausible. The smaller the range of the effect, the less required the highly trained physicists: everyone outside the event would notice. Usually, when touching this end of the puzzle, a faint voice would sound in his head. *Maybe they do.* Overall, the more convincing idea was at once also the most monstrous one: the event was universal. What was happening to him not only happened to everyone else, it also happened *everywhere*. It made sense not only because it removed the inconveniences of contradictions in every regionally restricted scenario, although contradictions were by no means disproofs, but because of the observable concept of spacetime.

For a brief period Aiden had considered that it may be possible to edit away the first syllable of this well-known, often used term. That it may be possible to think of the universe as consisting of time, that what we perceive as space was also time, not merely connected with it in a somehow-way. Brief, it only took a single remark of an old professor present in the relevant media to remind him, while it was possible to move forward in both space and time, and indeed inescapable in case of the latter, one could only return from one of those trips. So much for conventional experience, and for the much more reliable measurements of nature. And again that tiny voice. Unless you're wrong, Professor. Unless you're terribly, terribly wrong.

But this simple statement was basic for a nature that wasn't abnormal. A nature that was the universe, a universe that wasn't abnormal, as it dictated normality itself. And time was the plausible answer to the question of the universe's topography. Human beings, when not armed with the more extensive, more descriptive language of mathematics, are ill-equipped to meet the challenges of the most fundamental of all conflicts: infinity versus finality. Both in the spatial and the temporal context each answer to this Yes or No-question can only be dissatisfying, marked by the inevitable 'but if so, then what' to follow it. If the universe is final then what lies beyond its borders? And yet, the infinite universe is unimaginable, and the limited universe with something else on the other side of its borders will pose the same question, namely what lies beyond the borders of the something, and doesn't that mean that the whole of every something has to be infinite after all?

The same with time, if one chooses to separate the two, either out of ignorance or fancy. A time without time is impossible to imagine. But that is imagination's fault, not time's, not nature's. The demonstration that time is indeed an existing something and not merely imagined or perceived had probably been the breakthrough of all breakthroughs, but it caused the bipedal mammal making it, and who'd previously just been wondering about this, to now seriously scratch its head.

But the answer, it appeared, had already been given. 13.7 billion years. Earth years, which is a pretty solid statement. A very long time, but not infinity. And it convincingly seemed that it wasn't

just space that had started as this hot snowball, but that the glue that had resulted in the need for a word, spacetime, wasn't a recent development. Once you walk this plank you'll sooner or later arrive at what the more plausible answer to the question of finality or infinity for you, by asking about time, and Aiden had arrived pretty early. What is the simplest definition of event? The shortest, the one employing the fewest words.

Aiden had eventually come up with 'motion through time'. Neglecting some of the more droll and bizarre suggestions in quantum physics he'd come across and felt unqualified to even understand. But both were essential for culminating in what would be an event, huge or insignificant, as both were equally valid in the eye of nature. Both essential, and at least for its start nothing much else. Motion was the game of the cosmic overall, but if not moving through time it could not cause an event. The very definition of event requires time to unfold in.

Time can be stopped, however. As manifested firstly by motion. There's a speed-limit, a gradual slowing of time along the scale of velocity, and at the end of which, the speed of light, time does stop. It also slows in growing vicinity to a strong gravity source, and at its extremest it'll also stop. Motion is also governing in the realm of the smallest, and here the effect can be reached by dropping temperature – a higher temperature is nothing else but the result of the smallest things making up what's being heated moving faster. You go the reverse direction and reach absolute zero, and they'll stop moving. And time will stop for them.

But since it has been established that time and space are linked, they would have started expanding together since that hot snowball, and they'd still expand together, so it was once again implausible that space could grow within an already existing time. Time and space together as spacetime created their realm where before was none. And if it had all started at one defined point 13.7 billion years ago, there would not have been either before that point. It's not just that 13.8 billion years ago there'd have been nothing. It's that 13.8 billion years ago would not have been.

Therefore the universe was, plausibly, finite.

Fine, and fair enough. How did this help him? Apart from having to understand the basics, and with it eventually the basics of relativity, and all this within a frame of time that was running out, but when imagining an expanding universe of spacetime providing the essentials for events, it was the same as with the much shorter and less consequential span of human history. It was a mistake to view progress as a smooth growth. Imagine it as two steps forward, three back, one step forward, another, then two steps back. See it as derailing from time to time. You do that, and it might enable you to look at even the greatest things as potentially being subject to interference, to things going *wrong*.

In other words, the universe was the greatest, most majestic thing imaginable. But what if not everything was going smoothly? What if something happened to it?

'Then we'd either be dealing with hypothetical other realms, like other dimensions, since you used the word interference, or the..., disturbance, if you will, comes from within itself, and is therefore based on its makeup and perfectly natural, since it has to be permitted by natural laws. I'm getting seriously intrigued by your screenplay.'

'What if that's precisely not what'd be the case? If it really *is* a violation?'

'You'd have to be a little more specific.'

'Can't, really.'

Blessed be the studios' manic secrecy. Up till now he'd always been able to deflect Sesha's probing by referring to fictitious prohibitions that could cost him his job and a lot of money if that's where the violation would be.

'Well. Then generally speaking. Remember that what's for us the Constitution of Natural Laws is constantly being amended. Things appear to be curious, are being investigated, the results are being tested, in the end they're either explained by local conditions, and the explanation perfectly chimes, or we're presented with a bundle of new physics, and we'll have to rewrite the laws. Which is what everybody's looking for, eyes wide open, mouths also, no one minding that they're drooling. But the laws are not made by us. We just record them, write them down. Just not on stone tablets, and the booming voice results from observation, and it's imperfect, it's incomplete, and it's prone to

contain errors. We don't know what's allowed and what's not, not to all and perfect certainty. We have a pretty good idea, but that idea is based on what we've learned so far. And that's way less than what we haven't yet learned.'

'Sounds to me that it's possible, then.'

'Hmm, sounds to me that if it's possible it won't be a violation.'

'It would be, if it'd be happening for a first time, against what should be possible and what not.'

'Just because something happens for a first time doesn't mean it isn't possible, or natural.'

'But it'd define what's to come next. And then it'd be established...'

'Hmm. I mean, I can kind of guess what you have in mind? Not to sound flippant, but perhaps we should get to it instead of talking in circles?'

'You're right.'

Which was the other thing. Where it concerned the subject matter at hand, and unfortunately still only at his, Sesha wasn't stupid, of course. So there they were. Naming it.

'There's the real possibility of acausal history, perhaps closed timelike curves at the edge of the hypersurface.'

'I've read about those..., hang on...'

Aiden feverishly tried to remember which pile, in the end he had to get up and to the couch, with Sesha's face patiently waiting. It was for him to follow, though she'd previously said she'd prefer if he was listening without visual guides. Now and then he had to remind her that he was a mere mortal. Hypersurface. This was one of the tough nuts. He didn't understand the concept. He just didn't. Sesha continued seamlessly when he'd returned.

'There's something similar predicted at the mouths of wormholes.'

'Wormholes.'

'Wormholes. They are...'

'I know what wormholes are.'

'Oh, good.'

'Okay, explain. The..., closed...'

'Closed timelike curves?'

'How would that look like with wormholes, why, and would that be registered.'

'I mean, a wormhole would be. In principle they're not prohibited, but it'd require an enormous amount of energy to keep them open long enough, and that would surely register.'

'Nah...'

'Yes.'

'I mean, no, not a solution for me.'

'Okay...'

'So the closed timelike curves.'

'It's a mathematical solution showing a world line of a material particle returning to its starting point, meaning that world line is closed. It's part of Gödel's metric.'

'I'm sure it is.'

'It's basically what allows wormholes. If they exist they'd also allow time travel back into the past. I'm simplifying.'

'Go on.'

'Something to sink your teeth into? How far *are* you with that screenplay anyway?'

'Not far enough. How big are we talking here?'

'How do you mean? The wormhole?'

'Forget the wormholes. This effect of a closed world line. How much could it contain?'

'We'd be talking particle physics at this point.'

'But that's..., it's not a matter of size in our world. Could be huge. Black matter is thought of as perhaps being unknown particles. Suppose, I dunno..., suppose a dominant closed curve.'

'So we *are* talking about loops.'

'Let's say.'

‘Okay, so off the bat, we can start by lumping everything in with time travel. If we think travel backwards that could potential create all kinds of awkwardness, like the grandfather paradox, if you know what I mean.’

‘Never understood why I’d want to kill my grandfather. He was a bastard, but...’

‘If you’d kill him before he could help conceiving one of your parents...’

‘Yeah, no need for details.’

‘But there are solutions that have been suggested. Novikov’s self-consistency principle, for example, would take care that you wouldn’t be able to kill your granddad. Something would happen that’d prevent you, and the outcome would always be the same, in this case your granddad fucking his wife, who gives birth to your mother who’ll give birth to you, so it’d be a futile way to try and commit suicide.’

‘Except the actions I’d commit in order to kill him would be new.’

‘But they wouldn’t affect the timeline. In every detail where they would you’d encounter a similar prevention. Call it a universal timeline insurance. Also, should a uniting theory of quantum gravity ever be formulated, replacing General Relativity, a lot will change, and closed timelike curves may be ruled out.’

‘But if they won’t be. You say *closed* means returning to a *starting point*. I’m a lay-ear, and to me that sounds not just like going back in time, but...’

‘Doing it indefinitely? Well, there are hypotheses that propose closed timelike curves passing through an event horizon where an observer would not be able to register a violation of causality.’

‘Explain.’

‘Honestly, that’s a little above my pay grade. I’d have to read up on it.’

‘Appreciate it. Though I’m not quite sure whether you should bother...’

‘Because you don’t want anything else that’d be detected.’

‘Right. Suppose that closed timelike curve won’t be registered, but it’d involve..., a lot. I mean, in terms of spacetime as region.’

‘How much?’

‘Going along the scale. Expanding. Until we reach the limit. Could the whole cosmos be affected?’

‘I’d say no? Because time...’

‘Right.’

‘We’re back at the beginning. Anything else beyond it, in one way or another? We’ve gone full circle, so to speak.’

The trouble was that, in the end, none of it had to make sense. None of it had been mapped out on a table at a programming session for his species’ evolution, they were not made to comprehend anything that went beyond informing them how to survive on the surface of a planet, plan their crops according to apparent seasons, and feel bonds between themselves and their offspring. Hence humans had to invent an alphabet for an existing language they’d discover by and by that would help them to tackle this beyond. Aiden himself was not made to even comprehend this alphabet, or maybe he was, but he’d been a slack about it, and the longer one waits, the older one gets, and one’s synapses will be decided, either primed to be good at this language, or to be a slack. And when you tell a slack that 95% of all things are still waiting to be understood, and that those are just the things known to exist, either by direct observation or by inference, the slack will be instantly reminded of his slackness and immediately become exhausted beyond belief.

‘Look, we can try and force everything you’d like to have into all of this, but we’d still be left with a shit load of unknowns and paradoxes. We just don’t know enough, and you shouldn’t take the *image* you might have of a closed timelike curve now literal, that way lies oversimplification and inaccuracy, and if I understand correctly, accuracy is the point. Just that at this point you won’t be a hundred percent accurate, because no one even knows what that would be like. All that said, you can bet that paradoxes would probably be a certainty. So for everything that’s worth, that’s your door to creative liberty.’

‘Someone once wrote that creative liberty is a last resort, not the fucking Côte d’Azur.’

‘I like that. Think I heard that one before.’

‘You have?’

‘I don’t know. Déjà vu maybe?’

Maybe. It was a familiar feeling whenever he suspected that he was wasting time with its topography or architecture, and both could mean the same. Wasting time was in itself somewhat of a conundrum, of course, but the pressure was growing, and it was not enough to do this just in order to keep himself from going insane, the way he’d started, the way he remembered it. Perhaps the priority had to be duration, after all, as the problem persisted no matter how much he could or would possibly learn about the effect. But trying to get a fix on it, trying to determine the Connect by memory, it put him right back where he started, with the fear of losing his mind. It could have been any when. At the dam, his best guess, but with his memory extending all the way back to his childhood there was nothing conclusive, nothing he could point at and go, ‘there!’. Anytime after, then, but it was the same. Almost. If he hadn’t the indicator, his own personal meter, and to hell with why he, why no one else. So if there was any good in going back and reliving the fear of that period, it was to probe what had scared him this much, and would he have known back then how they’d intensify, how they’d increase, how they’d grow longer, until he’d finally have the nerve to dissociate enough and look at them from outside the effect they had on him, and that way see a measurement, a means for estimating, a clock ticking down.

Déjà vu.

As with everything else it was frustrating. In context they were like dreams, just as elusive, and if you try to remember when exactly you had a specific dream, say, a fortnight ago, you’ll need the luck of something else that had stood out right after you woke from it. Again he couldn’t be certain. Only that they began some time after that terrible day. Couldn’t say when the first one occurred. It was not that they’d been anything terribly new, everybody has them. Many people will also have experienced an echo, or two of them on the same day. Some might also know periods in which they’re experienced more often. Periods that will end.

There was no such period, and they didn’t end for him. Their frequency increased, but gradually enough, he would have found it curious, no more, if that had been it. The intensity grew as well, though, and so did the respective durations. Commonly a déjà vu lasts anything between mere moments to durations still measured in minutes. His eventually grew a half hour, a full hour, hours old. It had begun with a few short ones daily, and now he began to see days as tainted with blots of ink, and the ink was taking more and more surface, and the blots became lakes, and the lakes showed the unmistakable tendency of coming together, aiming to become one, big lake covering everything. And they became ever severer, ever more indulgent, ever more urgent and convincing. When he’d told his therapist, which hadn’t been during their first sessions, he could have told none of it to a stranger right away, confidentiality or not, and for the very reason that made him suspicious now after he had, he saw the power of the keyholder in her, who could have him committed any time, and he’d have to try and figure it all out from within the environment of a psych-ward. But when he’d told her and she’d used the term, he’d flatly retorted, ‘try déjà vécu’. Naturally he’d done his research.

‘Tell me what it’s like,’ Miller had said.

What was it like. Just like with any déjà vu, just like with any other person telling you about it, and just as hard to describe, just as much as that fleeting dream. Only a lot more of all of it. Frequency, duration, intensity. Easier to punctuate by then by the periods in a day he positively knew not to be that. Periods that felt almost normal, if he wouldn’t expect them to dissolve behind every corner. In appearance, for lack of a better word, the description would be identical: you are certain, positive, that everything contained in a moment is something you’ve experienced before. The tumbler on the table, the light, your vision as it pans across the room to the window. Everything that’s said. Everything you think. The way you feel. It’s all not similar, but identical to how it has already happened before. And you’re totally lucid, you’re completely there, it’s all enhanced, and you almost, *almost* know what’s coming next, you can almost foretell, only you can’t, you’re just that tiny step behind, *it* is that tiny fragment of a segment ahead. It’s like with those iconic movie

scenes, those iconic pieces of music. Not only do they have to exist, it's as if you know them, because they had to exist, but you can't complete the melody, you can't tell how the scene will end. Only almost. Tantalisingly almost.

Aiden, however, had come to understand that no matter how short the distance, how brief the difference in time between the almost and the *it*, it still had length. And within that length, that duration, he leaned forward a little more, as if suspended by the shoulders, he leaned out a significant bit more, and it was still not enough, because he was leaning into darkness, swallowing his face, his whole head. The near-certainty could not so easily be explained away with a Swiss cheese of a hypothesis about neurons firing a few salvos to trick you into an alarming but fake state, a cheese consisting of more holes than edible material even for neuroscientists. It might have been, with a good-hearted, 'boy, that was intense', after it was over. But soon enough, there it was again. Eventually, slowly becoming the norm. His norm. And no one else's.

It was before the phenomenon had taken over most of his days, but with the tendency already discernible, that he'd thought he was losing his goddamn mind. The fear of that could just as well have destroyed him, it had been just as intense, he supposed it spoke for his sanity that what he chose to combat the fear with had been reason. Miller tried to assure him that this had either neurological or psychological origins, and he'd expected it, and he'd been able to lean back and reply that, oh, but he'd been there, he'd so been there.

The neurologist had been his first stop. A rather condescending specimen who'd wanted to know how he spent his days, and who, after he'd truthfully replied that lots of it was spent in front of his comp, had jollily asked, 'gambling?' No, he'd replied. You? It had made it easier to lie to her. To add a few features, headaches he didn't have, dizzy spells he didn't experience. He'd wanted to make sure she'd do what he wanted her to do, and to her credit she did, scheduling an EEG and an MRI for him at the nearby hospital. They turned out negative. Nothing wrong in the upstairs department. The relief other people would have felt was sour for him, put him in a cynical mood. Either what he was experiencing was real, was not him, and he was only an instrument registering what he shouldn't have been able to register, judging from no one else doing it. Or he was going insane. It was the neurologist subtly suggesting it, by referring him to a therapist. Enter Miller. When Aiden had finally come out with the whole thing Miller had been close to telling her client that he might want to look for a better suited therapist, 'you know. Someone with enough time at hand but not enough self-respect to allow you circling the target indefinitely.' That seemed almost funny now. But he had to agree. The sessions were time, too. She'd taken it better than he'd expected, except for that one little misunderstanding.

'No. We are.'

'I suppose you're not referring to just the two of us.'

'That's right. It's not like in the movies.'

'What *is* it like?'

That's the part, he felt, where shrinks are making it easy for themselves. Shrink sessions were divided into the one who did most of the work and someone skilled in rhetorical retorts. Come back with a question, a question formulated on the basis of what's been said last. Simple enough when it's about heartbreak and break-ups. One thing as long as they were talking about that day, about what had led up to it, and what it had meant for him later. He could have stuck to it and listen to her listing the possibilities within the frame of pathology, anxiety-driven phenomena, a blend of chemical reactions to how reality invades via that elusive thing called psyche, riding the carousel of what causes what, what comes first, the egg of imbalance or the free-ranging, wild running chicken of external events that causes the balance to tilt, just as anger is a perfectly justifiable reaction to an injustice that decisively occurs outside the brain and body, but is made possible by chemistry inside. He could have told her the story up to that point, and dream through lectures about trauma, about how it can manifest itself somatically, and he would have found himself forced to ask the same question Miller occasionally popped, why on Earth was he here? Why indeed. A physicist would be appropriate for the important bit, not a physician for the mind. He'd explained that he had one. But he needed something else as well, she'd suggested. Which is why he stayed. He didn't know the

answer to that one, not precisely, only that she was smart, smart enough, and what he really wanted was a neutral eye. An eye that had to be unburdened with all the stuff he had to learn, a test dummy for how to tell the world.

He wouldn't tell the world, though. He wasn't a fool. He probably only needed to tell *someone*. What *it* was probably like.

It probably affected everyone. Not just a small town known for a rodent, and it certainly did not serve a single human, a chance to get his life back in order, a chance to become *good*. The bottom item on the long, long list of what the universe doesn't have patience for is solipsism. It was an effect, a neutral occurrence, the cause of which he had not determined and probably never would, and it at least encompassed the entire planet, and likely more, the solar system, its location in the galaxy, the entire galaxy, but the most convincing argument could be made for the whole universe being subjected, and he didn't know why he was the only one who noticed. How's that for a delusion of grandeur, doc?

Actually he'd made some feeble steps into making sure about that. Typed the relevant tags into the most used search engine, refined the search, and by all means, there were plenty of people who felt somewhat like him. Problem was, they were all bogus. Deluded at best, in most cases clearly making it up. One is sort of predestined to spot the deceivers when one is really affected. It helps to distinguish between genuine anguish and pretence. Nearing 7.760 billion people, and he found no one who experienced what he did. For a short while he'd tentatively engaged on a couple of message boards, but quickly decided it was costing him too much precious time.

That didn't necessarily mean that there *wasn't* anyone else, only that if there was he'd looked in the wrong places. Miller had asked him what being the only one feeling one way about something did to his confidence in its regards. Nothing too good, he'd replied with a frown, for he did not like the question. If she thought he hadn't done due diligence she was mistaken, however. He had fought it, all right, had thought himself crazy, deluded, simply mistaken, the victim of a malady that could lead him to believe in the devil incarnated for all he'd be able to tell. Do the loonies know they're loonies? Actually, most of them do, she'd informed him.

'But you came out on one side.'

'Trust me, I'd prefer to be bonkers. Very much so.'

'And you concluded you're not. Even though you say you're the only one thinking this way.'

'Everyone or almost everyone thinking differently isn't an argument. Doesn't mean they're right and you're wrong. Not so long ago that almost everyone on the planet believed it was the sun orbiting Earth. There would have been someone believing otherwise, I mean it's a question of only two answers, but they'd been laughed at at best, or burned at the stake at worst.'

'So you're that person. You're the only one among billions who knows.'

'Not by wanting it. Least of all because I know stuff that others don't. You got any idea how much homework I have to do?'

'I'm beginning to have a fair one, yes.'

'In the olden days people would have thought they'd been chosen by divinity. Carpenters, husbands of merchants, bronze age, not the most educated quarters, and yet suddenly they saw reason for calling themselves prophets. I'm less than a carpenter, I've never sold anything in my life except old books when I needed the money. I'm the least prepared for this thing.'

'So why you?'

'Because it isn't divinity. There's no purpose. The effect is the result of random occurrences, just like anything else, so whatever it is that makes me aware of it will probably be down to the same principle. It's an accident that I know.'

'That's pretty weak, you'll have to admit. And convenient.'

'In the absence of an informed theory and its confirmation that's all what I got, and it's all what I can have.'

And she'd thrown up her hands.

He knew how rationalisation works, of course. With him being aware of this, too, could he be as easy a prey for it than if he wouldn't know?

‘Very much, yes. All you need to do is to remind yourself of it, and you’re *at least* as good to go.’
Alright, smartass. All fair and good, until one gets to the practical grounds for knowing something’s afoot, and it’s not you going la-la.

Which is to where they’d circled back now. The indicators. The clock of familiarity.

The blots weren’t coming together in a uniform way, it wasn’t an even spread that left the last dry spot shrinking as a round vacancy until the ink would close over it from all directions simultaneously. But the tendency was undeniable. Had it been an illness, a progressive worsening of symptoms with better days, then better hours in between, the last stop in the distance would have been death. A very massive star in its death throes, shedding ever more gas, and the final is cataclysm. It didn’t feel like coming death, it did feel like moving towards cataclysm. It wasn’t either.

‘The...’

‘The Connect.’

Seen one by one, the attacks, the *déjà vu* that had mercilessly become the more extreme version of *déjà vécu*, could only be described in the same way as what people ordinarily experienced. A mundane action that no more stood out than any of the context in which it was performed suddenly gained significance. It was known. He’d done it before. The side of his hand inadvertently dipping in a drop of goat’s cheese spread at the edge of the plate as he picked up a sandwich. His turning of his hand, the sight of the cheese on it, the way he had to fumble out the toilet paper that served as a napkin from his left pocket with his right. He could almost tell how exactly he’d wipe, crunch the paper, throw it into the waste basket in the corner next to him and the desk, and how it landed, everything right at the border of the moment it would then happen exactly like it. He’d be hyper-lucid, extremely aware of the present moment, of how fluent and fugitive it was, how it passed at once with its coming, how it persisted with its going.

He could feel *it*.

Over time duration would extent with new attacks, until much of an afternoon, a good chunk of the night was being spent in this state of almost knowing ahead, every detail, every change, his very own thoughts. He felt it with him in the room, and eventually it felt as if it was feeling him. *It* noticed him. Aware itself or not. To it, it was he who was out of joint, now in its new reality. It was a frightening feeling, but then, *it* was spooky, and always had been.

He began to look at everything, the news, the view outside his window, the people walking, crows flying and croaking, sounds and sights, the thousand small events a day consists of, the quiet of the uneventful, with eyes that barely knew, but barely knew before they should have. It was only a matter of time, and he’d already come to see it as time again when the little question would present itself: what if. That was still before the balance of what he’d felt of the effect and what remained as ‘normal’ had not tipped itself, before he’d reached the Lagrange point of reverted pull, the instances of *déjà* were still happening in a world that he could live in as a causal one. If madness this is there’ll be no harm in making the investment. Because, and after all, what if.

The result was a total transformation of his habitat, and much of it was awfully familiar. How many times had he done this? How many times had he become this painfully aware, gone through the struggle, how many times of clearing the walls, of creating space, the same useless, empty drawers out, the same clippings up, the same image of the madman, the red twine, and why he didn’t use any. What was the compulsion here? If not the urgency. Because the increase of duration was but a mere symptom, and cursed was he that he should know. That he was being pointed, not by mind, but a new law, to where it would not end. To where the surface would be covered, to once again become clean slate.

It seemed a logical conclusion that it would be then. The moment his full day was one long *déjà*. Trouble was, no matter how he tried, a full day never was in view. A full day is full only when it ends. And where it ends, where it begins, it’s down to where you are, not manufactured clocks, but the rotation of the planet. If he was right, if that was how it was, he still wouldn’t know the moment. Until it would surprise him. Hoping now, or wondering if he hoped, he would remember.

Which left the question why. Why did he? How could he? The universe is everything, all that it contains. Contained thus was all that which he contained, his brain, the firing between synapses, his thoughts, though not overtly made of stardust, still belonging to the cosmos. Nature only is what can be and thus will. Within the radius of an effect, what is inside will be affected. Not knowing all this would be norm, and that is what he saw in everyone. He either could not or he didn't want to be seduced, he hadn't been selected, he was a flaw within the fault, a second violation in a violated universe. When things are going wrong, there's no reason they should do it without kinks.

'And yet. There is this But.' Miller snatched the packet from her desk. It was her last fag. And he thought, typical. 'You can't *really* look ahead. Look across the brim. It's always only almost. If it's increasing you should at some point be able, shouldn't you. Instead you have this Shepard tone of half-ass would-be premonition. Does it not occur to you that you might have been right earlier on? Because, no matter how intense, it's still like what others have described. The difference is the intensity, and the persistence. Let's focus on that for now, since you're still trapped in only *almost* knowing.'

Every single word and gesture, that last smoke, and all of his reactions, hidden from her. Like a faint headache, or a painless migraine, it didn't show, the others couldn't see it.

'That, oh shrink,' and he was almost sad when saying it, 'that is where you're wrong.'

'Let go.'

'No...'

He knows the strain, the pain the weight produces, is as bad for him, but now his hand stopped gripping his wrist and lies flat against his lower arm as if caressing it. Reassuring him.

'Let go. It's okay.'

'No. No.'

Like everything else it had come in spurts, but the intervals had been much longer at first, and it was much more irregular and rare, and could have just as well counted as the sort of accidental marriage between coincidence and good old instinct as many people experience every now and then. And coincidence always needs to be taken into account. Aiden had always known that the universe was strange, just how strange he'd begun to understand lately, and how much stranger would it still be if it didn't feature coincidences. That's when he would have believed in a supreme intelligence, and he'd have already known the first thing about this intelligence, that it could only be a supreme intelligence suffering from OCD. So there was that. Coincidences were like lightning, though, lightning striking twice on the same spot wasn't impossible, but highly unlikely, and from the third strike on one had to pay attention.

What made the determination of duration even harder was that the effect could have set in even earlier than he thought, earlier even than that day, because moments like those, moments when he thought he knew, outside any experienced déjà, to be then confirmed, they were a known, too, even though it was still within the limits of what warranted no more than a cock of the head and a muttered 'uh, that's strange', like that evening after Goblin's Cave, the first whole day he'd spent with James and the others.

'I have the right drop for the occasion.'

'Don't say. Macallan, 18 years.'

'How on Earth did you know?'

'He didn't. You're pulling our legs. That's a fortune.'

'Well, then he's probably got one. He and waste are old companions.'

'Let's show it, then.'

When James had produced the bottle from behind his back he'd smiled and looked him directly in the eyes.

'That's strange.' Eight out of nine times it is the woman who grows suspicious first. Suspicion and superstition are siblings, dating back from when both could be indistinguishable on the tick-list of survival. 'How *did* you know?'

‘Guessing?’

‘Sure.’

For the rest of the evening Aiden would have Erica’s attention, from time to time he’d catch her eyeing him with curiosity.

They were nestled in an overabundance of cushions in James’ cabin overseeing the ocean from near the edge of a cliff a good five miles outside town. That’s right. James owned a cabin, and a cabin with a view. They hadn’t found octopuses in or around the cave, likely because there weren’t any. James wouldn’t say where or from whom he’d heard that there were, and he was undeterred in the endeavour to have the best and wettest look, wearing oilskin waders as the only one, his enthusiasm was comical, and perhaps so with intention. Jamie had clarified the confusion of nomenclature, naturally it had been Jamie, he would have had at least two books about Cephalopodae in his collection, advising them that it should properly be *octopodes*, but that virtually no one was using this term, and octopuses was fine due to naturalisation. Everybody had nodded with disinterest. Aiden had been delighted that Jamie hadn’t hesitated when they’d invited him to come along, as opposed to moping about in solitude somewhere, in fact he’d lightened up and said that it was exactly what he needed. For him the previous evening had been horrible, his jokes had been as good as they come, most of them the repertoire Aiden had already heard, but their delivery had been poor, a lot of unintentional stuttering, twice or thrice destroying what otherwise was a perfectly good one, the audience reaction had been accordingly lukewarm, there’d been a mild heckler Jamie sought to ignore instead of incorporating him until James had taken care of the guy, which had somehow made it worse, and in the end Jamie had basically frozen on stage. He’d never seen him like this. All was down to concentration. Be distracted, and a maelstrom opens up.

Aiden had readied himself to intervene should James have offered something akin to condolences afterwards, anything that could be viewed as condescending, Jamie would have been sensitive to this already because he had those feelings for Erica. But James had acted more than reasonably. No remarks of the kind that aim to assure the one still in the progress of climbing out from a worm pit of blunder that next time will be better, inevitably drawing a snappy ‘what next time’. No ignoring the whole thing either. Instead he’d shoved a drink in his hand, malt whisky by the smell of it, and Jamie had accepted it as what he’d indeed needed that moment. Not surprisingly, Jamie had wanted to go home soon after. Aiden had still thought he’d possibly not show up next day. But he did. And he’d done some work on himself, not wanting to spoil the mood of the excursion.

The outsides help. You’re a city- or town slicker, and every time you get out into what still counted as wilderness, and you’ll ask yourself, why am I not doing this more often? Wind and weather serve as a reminder of heritage. Heritage is home. Home is reassurance. A bit odd, since the homes we built are meant to keep us safe.

‘How much did this bottle cost you?’

‘Can’t recall.’

‘Should be around 300 at least.’

‘And how do *you* know about *that*?’

‘He’s got a book on Scotch, I’m sure.’

‘Embarrassingly, I have.’

‘Is there anything you two *don’t* know?’

He and Jamie had squinted up the ceiling and finally answered, ‘yes.’

‘Me, I’m blissfully uneducated.’

He knew that James was shitting. He’d probably enjoyed a much better, much more expensive formal education than either of them.

‘Yeah, since you don’t even know what you paid for this,’ Erica teased him. ‘Right. You know exactly what you’ve spent.’

‘It’s alright. I’d still get back to my Glen Moray. Smoother.’

‘And affordable,’ Jamie added.

‘Are we really gonna talk about booze the whole evening? Let’s get some music rolling.’

‘She’s right. You can’t drink it while you talk it.’

The cabin was in a romantic state of neglect, wind could be heard whistling through cracks and spaces that wouldn't close properly, paint was peeling everywhere, much of the back wall outside was basically one large craquelure. What Aiden remembered most of this first day and night of their happy days was the night, when they'd all arranged the cushions around them without as much as having to get up, the blankets in reach. One bottle of Scotch isn't enough to make four people sharing it writhing drunk, but James was soon passed out in Erica's arms like a drooling oversized infant of hers. Jamie had arranged himself neatly against the wall early in the evening, which left Aiden between him and semi-comatose James. Erica had her head propped up on her arm and elbow, watching him as he struggled with the blanket's length.

'You're very protective of him, aren't you?'

'Now why would you say that?'

Aiden was sure that Jamie wasn't asleep yet, even though he pretended to be, but listening attentively.

'Nothing. I don't know. Just seems that way.'

'He's my friend. Known him for a while.'

'So have I. Haven't spent as much time together, of course.'

Aiden knew for a fact that Erica and Jamie had hardly spent any time together.

'And our host?'

'Not that long. Couple months.'

'Really? Seems as if you've been together for a decade or so.'

'Yeah, people say that.'

'He's quite something.'

'He is, yeah.'

James was drooling a little through his open mouth and his alimentary system chose that moment to conduct some venting. They both laughed.

'Yeah, closed indoors...'

'Want me to open a window...?'

'Nah, I'm used to it.'

'Just don't lift the blanket.'

Aiden felt content. Probably happy. When you are, how much time will you waste on thinking about whether you are? Expressing it should be the trait of the humble, as what the word describes won't be a state that will last forever. One may be perpetually content if lucky, privileged, too often the precious feeling was being conflated with not having to care, or choosing not to care. And how much should one kindle those fleeting times. That he was unable to sleep, and good with it, probably meant that he was happy. Three friends, two of them new, all of them worth it, and right now nothing and no one disturbing them. Outside only a few stars were visible, the sky was slowly overcasting. The sound of the wind. He began to probe his feelings, unsure whether he wanted. Of the whole of his affection there was a slightly larger quantity that demanded his attention towards this sleeping, drooling bulk on his right, and there was something alarming about it. Knowing James no longer than for one evening and day, he'd already begun chronicling their budding friendship. When can you ever say that? That heavy-set young man born with a precious spoon in his behind for which he'd taken the pain of removing it himself, and now the path was clear for unashamed venting. There was something very beautiful about him. The life, the honesty, the integrity. The smarts. Aiden couldn't say what attracted him the most, and it was probably the combination. The next morning at breakfast he must have been staring at him once too often or for too long.

'Yo, just so you remember, he's mine.'

'Have you come here in advance to prepare, or are you just stockpiling food up here?'

Coffee, jam and marmalades, rolls and bread, eggs, orange juice. The rolls were fresh, as if he'd sneaked out and bought it from a hidden bakery that only existed for his moods, and some of the eggs he'd scrambled, and he was real good at it.

'Honey and mustard,' he replied to the compliments.

'Okay, how would anyone even get the idea of putting mustard into eggs, and with honey.'

‘Simple. Because it’s been around.’

‘He’s very good at cooking. A dream. Because I’m really crap at it.’

Aiden would later have the opportunity to learn that she wasn’t kidding. So much for stereotypes, she was indeed an extraordinarily crap chef, the whole Mediterranean shook its head in shame.

‘I do like it here. Just as it is. People keep telling me I should do repairs, get it into shape. I consider it an improvement over the house I grew up in.’

‘Mansion?’

‘Kinda. Not quite, but close. Infested with vermin.’

‘Yeah, they’re not judgemental. Rats? Mice?’

‘My family.’

James had an elder brother he loathed, a father he despised, and a mother he’d ignored since he’d been ten. He had no particular reason for hating them except for what they were. He hadn’t been abused, he hadn’t been overly spoiled beyond what had been provided by enhanced living standards, compared to others he’d probably not completely lacked in love, at least not as a young chick. Support had been a different matter, though not a big one either. The need for approval had gone lost early on with the realisation that no one seemed to care anyway, so he’d been free to pursue every half-hearted fancy that would take him at any given time, and the only thing infuriating him had been his family being right again and again when remarking that he’d grow out of it. Twice an ill-fated attempt at a band, defeat had been inevitable given that James had little musical talent, wasn’t good at the guitar and couldn’t hold a note if his life depended on it, while insisting that he should be the lead singer. Drawing and painting had lasted a matter of weeks. In school he’d been somewhat prolific as a lead actor in several plays, and two of them he’d written himself, directing one. He’d later entered a few drama school auditions, and from the few words he’d granted those recollections on another occasion Aiden followed that he’d left the buildings while hissing some dismissive remarks about the teachers’ inaptitude. ‘Truth is,’ he’d added though, ‘my heart wasn’t in it either.’

‘I really should have an idea what I want to do by now, I suppose. But – I haven’t. Who’s to say there isn’t time. Perhaps too many people make up their mind too early.’

‘So why can’t you stand them? At least they’re not been in your way.’

‘They should try. No,’ he sighed, ‘it’s because they’re..., irrelevant.’

‘That doesn’t sound at all like coming from a high horse,’ Erica suggested.

‘Until you meet them, and realise how much they’d disagree with the assessment.’

Jamie would later remark on how James sounded like he hadn’t just flunked at drama school but also dropped out of the Royal Family.

‘What, you haven’t met his parents yet?’

‘God, no,’ James exclaimed.

That first Sunday they’d lazy it out at the cabin, then stroll back to town at the edge of the cliffs, and browse the Sunday flea market near the station, not buying anything except for Jamie, carrying ever more books each time they saw him, until they had to help him when they left the place.

‘So you’re interested in Gardening Techniques of the Outgoing 18th Century...?’

‘What if I am?’

‘By Trevor B. Chelsea...’

They had late lunch, early dinner at a cheap restaurant near the seaside, annoying the staff, and discussing politics. James thought of Labour as dilapidated and of the Tories at this point as basically being anti-human, and he wouldn’t subscribe to a left or right world view as long as the Left and the Right continued the sideshow trick of being an Ouroboros that managed to bite its own tail twice. When he asked him what he meant by that James replied by stating it as a falsehood to even think in those terms. Left and right implied two opposite directions, while in fact everybody moving in either went straight onto the path of a crescent, and zooming out the two crescents would reveal themselves as one and the same that concluded, or rather not, as a circle.

‘And the commonalities begin soon, already near the bottom.’

As every young man, no matter how smart, he talked politics in a rather vague and unspecific, but very self-assured manner.

They concluded the evening with a movie because ‘what else can you do in this town except drinking, partying, eating or sit at the beach’, after which they’d drink at the beach. They all agreed there was only one cinema worth it, and it showed a Canadian horror film. They had more time for more drink upstairs before it, and James and Jamie went on a film-off, with James revealing everything one needed to know about the director of the film they’d watch and more. They settled for the front row, because none of them understood why everyone preferred the big screen to then minimise their frame by sitting in the back, and twenty minutes in James had fallen asleep. They still went to the beach afterwards. He had an amazing ability of being right back from a quick nap in between. Erica would call it quick recharging at another point.

They shared a bottle of red on the pebbles, and pebbles, temperature and wind soon made it uncomfortable, and they manned it out for a bit until Erica got up and kicked each of them in the butt.

‘Stray God?’ Jamie asked after the two had left.

‘I’m surprised you wanna go back there so soon after. I’m sorry.’

‘It’s okay, man. Only place open long enough. Five hours till the usual place.’

‘I think I wanna turn in for today. You’re not done yet?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe, yeah. Maybe not stretching it.’

‘You look good.’

‘I am. Was a good day.’

‘It was.’

‘So we’re a quartet now.’

‘Seems like it. You mind? Because of...’

‘No. No, man. Really not.’

‘Alright. Quarter.’

‘It’s okay. Let go.’

He doesn’t want to let go. He won’t. Hand clamped around the wrist, already down to the base of the thumb, the other hand refusing his arm, only laying against it in a last caress, eyes that can’t be this close, and yet they are, and he knows that he will. More than a human can hold. So much more.

‘Let go. Let go.’

It is a whisper against the continuous sough of the white falling water. And he lets go. His arm and shoulder immediately going from hot pain to numbness, and the other body shoots away from him, and he feels its weightlessness. It’s gone almost instantly, the white comes between them, and gone are those eyes, eyes he won’t see again. And the rest is forgetting.

Aiden had what he thought of as two foldable epiphanies, he’d had them numerous times, and they’d later fold into themselves, looking like what he imagined three-dimensional futility should look like. Number one was that he may as well give up on trying to find the Connect by thinking back, thinking about what could have been the definite moment. There was a logic behind this attempt, if he could only determine it with certainty, and it didn’t have to be spot on the minute, he could at least have an inkling about some rhyming, a location, a similar act, a similar chain of events. The epiphany came with understanding that there wasn’t actually any good reason to believe that the Connect should link anything that somehow fit, and that even if he had a photographic memory of every second lasting back, he’d probably see nothing, and he better focus on how the déjà-free moments were diminishing, and how fast. It folded the moment he could see that he couldn’t see, even though the knowledge beyond the leaning, beyond the terminator, grew steadily as well. He couldn’t tell whether he’d be fully present, whether his brain would be quick enough, and everything felt too organic, too irregular. A steady, even growth, a wall of fire coming towards him, a tidal wave, that would have been something to calculate. Instead..., how had Miller described it? The Shepard tone. Only it was an interrupted, perforated Shepard tone that was all

over the place, playing hide and seek with him. Well, then. Let's play. And he felt *its* assumption that he knew the rules.

Which was the other revelation, more of a recognition he had to get back to over and over, because he really feared it. The rules. Presuming there were any. Which he did, not completely blindly, but guided by Sesha's firm reassurance. He had asked her about it. The reply had come as a graphic, and it had come at once, she clearly had been waiting for the question, and she confirmed the impression a moment later by telling him she'd wanted to talk to him about this.

The graphic was a diagram with two numerical axes, the vertical one marked with an x , the horizontal one with an r . A slightly curved line ran from the left at the 0.6 mark a little above the x -axis' middle to split into two curving lines that would each split again a distance later, and so on, until soon the whole picture looked like the most serious cardiac attack in the history of beating hearts. Curiously, though, the dense scribbling was interrupted a couple of times by bars of vacancy, and looking carefully he saw rougher splits at the corners, similar to the first ones.

'It's a bifurcation diagram.'

'You don't say.'

'It's chaos theory. In dynamical systems that are sensitive to the initial conditions giving rise to them small differences in those conditions will generate wildly different outcomes, even in deterministic systems that behave according to the initial conditions. They might start in a deterministic order, but this order does not make them predictable. Lorenz described it as a present determining the future, but the approximate present won't determine the approximate future.'

'You lost me there. Approximate...?'

'Never mind that for now. Thing is, if you look closely, there'll be a tendency to re-establish order, or a *new* order. Meaning given enough time, even chaos will lead to order. The universe is tidy.'

Which sounded like good news. So even if the effect was a kink, a violation, and a violation sounded like a good cause of chaos to him, the universe would not allow it to sink everything into chaos. He'd asked her whether one could think of it as the cosmos readjusting the rules to the effects of the violation, thus turning chaos into new order. She said she'd rather get back to him about that, since this illustration didn't necessarily have the entire universe in mind.

But it sounded just about right. It didn't *feel* like chaos. Closing in on the Connect, albeit be it involuntarily, felt pretty deterministic to him. It folded because he could not expect to learn half of what Sesha knew, let alone an amount of information that probably went way beyond what anyone knew. So it had rules. Great. What were those rules? No idea.

Perhaps that was the point. Learning about them, bit by bit, every round a little more. Instead of 'Hallelujah' the choir sang 'Soooo-lipsism, solipsism, solipsism!'

He was exhausted. It was one of those moments when the whole collection, every picture on the walls, every diagram, every scribble looked like nothing to him, and that was known, too, was nauseatingly familiar, identical to how it had already been before, because this had been before. Everything, making himself another coffee, putting one leg over the other, then putting it back, the thought of needing to lay down, the knowledge that soon he would. That pack of smokes only seemed to get emptier. This night wasn't new. Not containing any of the *knows* yet, which were the worst, the most tantalising, and the most tormenting. But the fear was there. He went to the mattress which was his bed, and let himself down.

It wasn't a fear of the Connect, of losing it all. *It* was with him in the room. Nothing special about that. It was everywhere, for everyone, no one was ever without it. People were just not supposed to notice it. It was a god no one should be aware of, the one and only god. People spoke of hyper-real moments, and he'd known them before all this, too. Hyper-awareness, of everything. Being fully in reality, at least that was the illusion. He now knew that what one was aware of was *it*. Something that, for once and only for a brief period, synced the clocks, and when they were synced, like an asynchronous ticking that will at some point tick at almost, then seemingly perfectly the same rate courtesy probability before departing again, when they were synced everything seemed more real than real because *it* came through, became quasi-visible. People love those moments, he'd loved them. Ask him now. They were now his norm, he was feeling it almost constantly, and he had this

god, this ghost with him, feeling back, noticing him, too, looking at him, because he should not be aware of it. It was looking at him now, and he was scared to look at the furniture, the small chaos, the desk, and too scared to close his eyes. Let's play then, it might have said, but it was quiet, always quiet. He knew that he'd know something soon. And maybe the old god had been right. There was a hell after all.

He could tell Miller was concerned. The patient has just revealed that he thinks he's Napoleon.

'So what you're saying is, you *are* sometimes able to look ahead. Predict. See what's coming.'

'Those three mean the same thing.'

'And that's been so...'

'It's relatively new. I mean, I think. Trouble is, I can't be sure about a couple things. Sometimes I think the reason for knowing all this is because I have some sort of predisposition, but there'd be others like me, then. Somewhere. And it's probably where madness lies. But I don't know if it began with this, if it's enhanced by it, or if I just hadn't noticed before. Instances we all know, we're all familiar with them, we think nothing of them, less than we care about *déjà*. But if you ask me how it feels. It feels new, and it's increasing.'

'But it's moments in which you think you can tell the future.'

'No, it's moments when I can tell what's already happened in enough detail.'

'Yes. Provided. Let's say that's so. But it's not something you can do all the time. You couldn't, for instance...'

'I know what you're trying to say. And no, that's not because I've heard it before. You're trying to tell me that I can claim whatever I want until I can demonstrate it. I can't. Not up to me. And even if, it's nothing spectacular, it's just like seeing a moment ahead. Imagine this office, and you can see what it's like ten seconds in the future.'

'The same, I'd presume?'

'Exactly.'

'Then how can you tell the difference?'

'I just know. It's hard to describe when there are no other people involved. Or some action I can watch being repeated. It is like *déjà vu*, only that it really seems to repeat itself, but not exactly with me *seeing* it before. I just know. And it's nothing out of the ordinary, because most of the time all events are ordinary, so the chances that it'll be something memorable are slimmer than a space rock hitting land. That's just how it is.'

'But it has happened when other people were present. Give me an example.'

'The other day you ran out of smokes. I knew you had, and I knew how you'd react, muscle fibre by muscle fibre.'

'You could have just noticed that I'd run out.'

'But I hadn't. I didn't pay attention to your bloody pack. Look, I know, okay, that's the thing. You can always explain things away. You'd have to experience it. I mean, I'm not trying to get in the news with that. Shit. Last thing I want.'

'You can also always find a way to make it fit your theory. Wanna hear mine or not?'

'Please, go right ahead. I know you will anyway, so...'

'The instances are vague and unremarkable because that's the only way they can be accommodated into your belief. If you'd be able to predict a plane crash, or a politician being assassinated...'

'Ever noticed how most of the memorable events are catastrophes?'

'But this way you can drive the idea, the feeling, for as long as you have to. You have the feeling the instances increase in number and in intensity because your state, your problem is not getting better. A problem that isn't helped has the tendency of getting worse. The connect you're fearing, that's the climax of it. It's the fear of implosion.'

Here they were again. Of course it made all the sense in the world from her perspective. If there'd been anything he'd hoped from these sessions, and even if she was right, talking in circles *really* defeated the purpose.

‘Good one, doc. I understand how this is working in your world, but that’s a past world. In the new there’s different laws.’

‘But you see what I mean, don’t you. It’s the first time that you’re telling me about this.’

‘And you see, don’t you, that it doesn’t require a loop, it doesn’t require a goddamn fortune teller to know in advance that you’d explain it this way.’

‘At least it *is* an explanation. Not just a vague trust me, and if you could only experience it. Sounds like religion. How *do* you explain it? You must have thoughts, not only about whether it’s new or not.’

‘I think it’s increasing. I think it’s an overlapping of the effect. The closer I get to the Connect, the more things are bent out of shape. Roll, curve, whatever the hell. If everyone had it, if everyone knew, they’d experience the same, the bending, the overlap. I mean, shit, back then the man demonstrated that space is curved. That time is connected. Spacetime. If something goes south with time, wouldn’t you expect *something* to change?’

‘But you still can’t tell. When this big change will finally come? Reveal itself? The connect? Used to be easier, twenty-four hour rhythm...?’

‘Don’t be snippy. You haven’t listened. It’s not like in the movies. The movies have to cram everything into ninety minutes, two hours tops, so they make it this short duration, because it’s more convenient, because they have to fit a number of repeats into those two hours. Twenty-four hours, that would implicate only Earth is affected. Do you know there’s a hypothesis that the universe does not merely expand, but that it’ll contract eventually, everything backwards, until it’s that dot again, until the next Big Bang, and so on.’

‘Well, at least we have enough time in that case.’

‘Yeah..., no. Because guess what, I’m not 13.7 billion years old. Can’t be that. And be glad, because if it were it’d mean that the Connect would be total cataclysm. It’d mean the end of the world.’

‘But in a way that’s what you’re implying, isn’t it. Even if it all starts again. It won’t go forward. A bit like the world ending for someone when they lose a loved one.’

‘Ah, speaking of connects. Or rather segues. A bit clumsy, don’t you think?’

‘Why are you coming here?’

‘Finally a good question.’

‘And I’ve been asking it before.’

‘I’ll have a good sit-down about it, promise. And I’ll let you know if something, you know, more *spectacular* happens I knew in advance.’

It was over the span of perhaps a fortnight, beginning about a week after he’d met his new friend, that Aiden noticed something not being quite how it was supposed to with James. Under the surface, but not too deeply buried, as when a heart beats this close under the skin it makes it translucent. Aiden was young, not too young not to know that instinct wasn’t always the most reliable attribute, though, but here he thought he could trust it. He had encountered the indeterminate signs of depression before, and it had been in the rudest, most merciless way, because the outcome had been. Most people would not have connected the word with the flamboyant young man he was breathlessly happy to call his friend. If anyone was the constant first at the breach it was James, and with anything, about anything. The first to help, the first to come up with an idea, the first with initiative. The one who’d come up with the prank, the one who’d see it through. Never to shy away, not from an argument, an exchange of abuse with a stranger, jumping a fence, riding a horse, or, at least according to him, the odd brawl when it came to that. His hair should have been red, for he was the Flynn of the town. Fearless, bold, and life-seeking. During that first week since the cabin it had been just the two of them a bunch of times, and though Aiden loved their newly founded quartet, he thought he’d never been as elated than when going on a binge of everything with James alone. Getting things interesting was an instinct with him, it weren’t contrived attempts to make himself interesting. Contrary to his tendency for self-deprecation he was whip-smart and he gave a shit, knew what adulthood meant, knew what it was about, but also knew that folly, silliness,

gayness and playfulness were not the prerogative of children. His victims could be anyone who'd not immediately establish reasonable cause for respect, and those who wanted it anyway in particular. A tanned, wavy blond twit in disguise, clean light blue jeans, leather jacket and a missing earring, had given it to a bum, they hadn't been able to hear what he'd said to him, but got the gist from the older man's reaction, and they had at once hated the twit.

'Let's follow him,' James had suggested matter-of-factly, and Aiden had immediately understood everything about the venture. James wore his usual casual elegance that wouldn't mind a pigeon shitting on it, Aiden was dressed in black and grey, perfect for behaving in a noticeable inconspicuous manner. It took the asshole four corners and two and a half full street lengths to finally realise he was being tailed, and from then on it was demonstratively looking away every time he looked behind himself. James and Aiden worked it as if they'd done it for decades, keeping a good distance, never allowing him to get away behind a corner. He soon grew very nervous. At one point when they knew he was just about to look Aiden crossed the road, and now he had to watch two angles. He bumped into people twice, and eventually it became clear that he'd started to walk aimlessly, not wanting to lead them where he was going, not wanting to reveal where he lived. At no point did he stop to confront them, at no point did he turn into a shop or sit down in a pub or café. Gone the confidence in his gait, gone the high-held chin, when his legs weren't visible in the crowd he looked as if dragged in an invisible cage. It was delicious. He also seemed to become exhausted, while James and Aiden could drop their pace to a leisurely saunter. Exchanging a glance across the road they decided it was time, and from then on kept their eyes firmly on him, letting him know they knew that he knew. He was unravelling steadily. He looked about himself, possibly in search for police, but what could he have really told them? All they had to do was deny and regard him as anyone would a paranoid lunatic. When he reached the tight lanes at the south end he hesitated, and then dove right into them, and from here it all got a little dramatic, the twit was walking faster and faster, his followers no longer hiding that they were out to get him, rushing behind him, gently pushing people out of the way, their gazes fixed on him. It all ended a little outside the lanes and close to the sea front when he turned into what they knew was a dead end. Confrontation. James and Aiden stood for a moment, the eyes of intent, Aiden probably overdoing it a little by opening his mouth in anticipation, and side by side they were meandering to the backing wreck of nerves. Upon reaching him he first said, 'help...?', then heaved on to shout it, but James and Aiden just continued walking past him, their eyes gliding off of him, and after a few more paces they doubled over with laughter.

Looking back didn't help, they thought they'd never seen anything this ridiculous.

'You fucking cunts. You have any idea who I am?'

'No,' Aiden brought out, with difficulty.

'No idea,' James squeaked. 'You know who we are?'

They laughed for as long as the guy stood there, unsure about his exit, until he finally just walked off, their laughter following him for one or two blocks. It had been beautiful enough for them to never having to mention it again.

Another time a sweater mom had been trying to give them a hard time about their opulent deployment of curse words at a pub-coffee shop hybrid because of her little son who shared the table with her and another goose-like and very much seemed not to mind at all, and Aiden had spotted the unmistakable danger signs of boredom on his friend right away. James addressed the boy directly as he considered talking about those present in the third person rude, asking him whether he'd already heard the terms 'cunt', 'bollocks' and 'ass-fucker' in school. The boy nodded enthusiastically, but here the waiter intervened in order to save both the boy from bad influence and the reputation of the joint. James went overboard with apologies and assurances, and when the waiter had departed asked Aiden whether that vagina from the library had gotten back to him, and from then on they stayed all serious and dignified as they chatted about the rectum mouth who served as interior minister, the bovine set of testicles the claim of hordes of asylum seekers lurking in Calais and waiting to come over to fornicate with their females was, and what penis may have thought it a good idea to replace the cycle lane's fine gravel down to the marina with asphalt.

‘Equine excrements,’ James exclaimed as he pointed at a barely visible headline on a newspaper dangling from a converted coat hanger, which referred to easing diplomatic relations between Washington and Riyadh. ‘It’s all about copulating oil ordure.’ Which is when the two women left with fluster and the boy, who did so with regret.

All in all, Aiden was surprised just how much time James spent with him instead of Erica, or at least with both of them when not with the full quartet, but then Erica worked, and James really didn’t. She didn’t work at night, but usually Aiden thought of that later. It was hard to think of anyone, including the other two, when he was alone with James, and the four of them together happened organically, and the perhaps most significant difference was that them all together usually involved an outdoors, an excursion of some sort, like an ill-fated forest outing that had left them all drenched to their bones as they’d failed to check the forecast, as well as running from a herd of cows when using their pasture as a shortcut back, or their visits to the old dam a few miles north-west from town, a place they all agreed had something quietly climactic, perhaps because it always looked abandoned and running on its own, or perhaps because it felt seriously unsafe, or them on the suspension bridge not far from it, not to cross it, but to hang out on it with a ration of booze. James and Aiden alone tended towards the indoors, be it pubs, bars and cafés, or James’ own flat, naturally much more expansive than Aiden’s, but not much tidier, museums and art galleries, and, of course, places they were not supposed to go. You could have stuck a welcome sign to those. When passing that long abandoned café or whatever it had been nestled into the wall along the west stretch towards the marina one late evening Aiden had dropped that he’d long wanted to get in there, so James had jerked his head back towards town, ‘let’s get some chips, then,’ and they’d walked back to get them and a couple of ciders, and then it had seemed to Aiden that his friend had since longer hedged a plan of how to get into the basically fortified place, because it didn’t take him long to pick the lock of the chain. Picking locks does take longer than one would think, and it also wasn’t something he’d expected James to be any good at, he learned something about him every day. Aiden had started to have dreams of security in which James was present in some way, not always visibly, often in the dead corner behind his right shoulder, dangerous situations in which he felt perfectly safe, because one only could with James around. The dreams may have played into why he wasn’t at all concerned as they committed breaking and entering now, both of them wriggling what might have been a piece of a broken broom stick into the gap of the door that had forgotten how to be opened, then pulling at with all their might until they could slip through, and pushing it close again.

It was dusty inside, though not as much as they’d anticipated. Quite dark, as the windows hadn’t been cleaned in their century, but their eyes would adjust. Their steps produced the most curious reverbs, dampened, and amplified. The designer of the place must have had a penchant for curves. Although there wasn’t enough light they thought the interior was mostly held in purples, the battered upholstered seating, those that were left, were definitely wine-red or reddish purple. All was empty besides those seats by the window, a curved bar counter with a hardly reflecting mirror behind it, and a scattering of debris on the floor, including long white ledges that seemed to have been thrown inside as none of the damage corresponded with their presence.

‘Must have been a great place once.’

Aiden nodded. They both knew what the problem was, and it wasn’t just affecting this one ignored place of heritage. No one on the council was willing or interested in bringing up the money for restoration, and when it indeed happened it was done by selling a location to some millionaire or billionaire for a few quid with the proviso that they’d mend the place back into a usable state, which usually was its death sentence. No, leave this place as it is, then at least the two of them could continue to appreciate it. It had what so many other places in town, frequented by daily masses, didn’t have. It had atmosphere.

It was there when, after they’d finished their chips, Aiden had thought he’d noticed this patch of darkness on James. Perhaps it was because he was quietly looking out through the dirty window, with only the barest of light hitting his face in return. He was unusually serious. Their intrusion into this place, meant as a spontaneous little adventure, had created a bubble, sheltering them from the

rest of the world, and inside this bubble it was just the two of them, inadvertently throwing them face to face at one another as who they were. Aiden did alike, looking out the window at the shadowy contours of the sea defence boulders and the black water that seamlessly merged with the sky, but periodically squinted at his friend's countenance that hung pale in the darkness, a handsome blond, youthful Welles.

'You plan on staying in this town?' the lad asked as if he'd noticed the shy glances.

'Easy enough a living, compared with..., virtually any other place in this country.'

'Yeah... I suppose. If that's the priority.'

'You don't, I take it?'

'Other places in this country, other places in the world, they don't foster self-interest as much.

Preoccupation with the self. I suppose that comes easily enough with a relatively easy living.

Everything's a party. A great community of easy-goers. It's all very well as long as it is easy. As

long as it remains so. You must have seen it. How quickly everyone drops it the moment someone

becomes..., difficult. The moment there's a problem. It's not only about being judgemental, though

there's that. It's like they're being allergic against problems, anything that smells like a problem,

even when it's not theirs. I've seen friends, folks who saw themselves as friends, who'd turned

away from their *friend*, because that friend had some troubles with another friend, a mutual friend,

and they'd turned away because they thought they had to make a choice. For no other reason. To

take a side. And that side's easily taken. You take the side of the one who's easier going. Easier to

be with. And who are those? It's the ones who don't give much of a shit to begin with. You don't

give a shit, you'll be easy to be with. You'll be entertaining, you'll make people laugh, they'll relax

with you, because it's all about chilling, and you can't chill if you give a shit. Ever notice how

offended people act when you decline a joint that's being passed around? They're not really

offended. They think you're not chilled enough. Not easy going enough, and not wanting it,

because, hey, otherwise you'd take a puff. And know what? They're right.'

James didn't take drugs, not because he was against them, in fact he was for blanket legalisation,

because he was against adults telling other adults what to do unless it was harming others, and

because the raging war on drugs didn't remove a problem but made it worse. And he'd taken drugs,

Aiden knew, he'd talked about it, he'd taken a whole variety, not least because he'd needed to know

what he'd be talking about, and most of his memories were fond, particularly those involving

psychedelics, but he'd not been taken to overdo things, as good effects will always be diminished

by overdoing it, often turning against you as what's now bad effects, and he'd not idealise any drug.

The experience had been enough in itself, he didn't need to make it a life experience. Recreational,

fine, mind-expanding game changer, what a load of crap. You take a good dose of shrooms, you

take some acid, of course you'll think that, and once it's over you'll scramble to retrieve the

experience, to feel it as you'd felt it, and you'll scramble it in another way. The reason why coming

down from a trip makes you feel melancholic about it is that they don't feel real anymore, those

revelations. But you want them to be real. And they're not. The good answers don't come from

drugs. They come from science. From telescopes and microscopes. The people using them aren't on

drugs when at work. James had never heard anything truly profound from any of the popular drug

advocates, including the most famous ones, meanwhile he'd learned a bunch of intensely

mesmerizing stuff from Sagan, Randall, Morrison and Levin, and the top advantage was that it was

all true. Drugs may inspire you, but ultimately they stand in the way of meaningful exploration.

That had been one of James' other monologues on another occasion.

'If everything's about recreation, you'll end up with a town full of selfish pricks.'

'I get you, but I don't view this town like that.'

'You been in trouble here? I mean personal trouble, the kind of trouble that'll make people choose?

Even if they don't have to?'

'Not really. You? Somehow I think it wouldn't bother you.'

'You think I'm some kind of superhero? That everything glides right off me?'

'No...'

‘Good. Because you could just as well call me a prick. Someone who doesn’t give a shit. Makes you vulnerable, giving a shit. The more credit it deserves.’

This had gotten way more serious than Aiden wanted it to. But saying something to the effect would have made James’ point. This wasn’t about drugs, though. Drugs hadn’t been the issue, not at any point, and with everything being on the man’s mind at all times, he didn’t just blindly ricochet between topics. So, what was the topic right now?

James’ head had inclined, and Aiden looked at his friend’s profile as he had fixed his eyes on an undefined point between him and the wall section below the window. It seemed more personal. Not even directly to do with everything he’d just said. The one thing James never seemed to give a shit about was how other people would perceive him, what they’d think of him, and now again he wasn’t posing, wasn’t consciously revealing something to him. Disapproval, outrage even, *were* things that were usually gliding off of him, but it was coming from people James didn’t care much for either. You do care, on the other hand, and you watch those you care for turning into dicks and assholes, that can be a harder thing to swallow. The more when it’s being directed at you. Aiden didn’t know of any particular case when James had let go of someone amounting to a friend, but then he only knew him in the context of their little quartet. He didn’t even know whether he really knew other people on a social level as he knew them, come to think of. He’d never met him before that evening at the Stray God, even though they’d lived in the same town, with all the gathering wells combined not amounting to too much.

‘Is everything alright between you and Erica?’

‘Yeah, why wouldn’t it.’

It had taken just a little too much time before the reply. Anyone growing to Aiden’s age will have experienced that the outward presentation of a relationship can be very deceiving, though he’d not apply any suspicions to James and Erica, they were a half of their quartet, after all, and he was spending a bunch of time with them, albeit not alone with Erica at this point. Sure they’d fight, and they were rather good at it. No apologies necessary for outbursts on either side, for naming each other names, for telling the other to stop acting like a dick/bitch, for giving the other the finger, instances later they’d ask the other whether s/he’d read this article in the Guardian, or seen that ridiculous advert ruining the front of the Arts Academy, as if nothing had happened, because nothing really had. It had quickly become an unformulated tenet of the quartet, don’t be pussy about words. You feel offended, that’s your problem, don’t try and castrate anyone’s expression. You don’t get the anger out, you’ll drag it with you for the rest of the day. They could have called themselves the No Divas.

‘Don’t think I haven’t noticed you two drooling around her.’

‘Do what around her...?’

‘It’s okay, man.’

‘I’m sorry, what...?’

‘I said, it’s okay. If one day you’ll be lucky enough, that’s her choice. Right now I’m lucky enough, and that’s her choice, too. Fuck knows where we got the illusion from that it’s them who’re ours. Never seen it. Not with anyone. I don’t even think it was so back when the matter was decided with clubs and biceps. The reason for the oppression has always been that we knew that patriarchy was up and ready, it’s always been. Hell, we see male rhinos, monkeys and dogs fight over them and think it’s male power that decides, truth is the fighting results from lack of confidence, and when they’re not fighting they beg, beg with pretty plumage, beg with elaborate courting rituals, bulging chests and pretty songs. Nothing’s changed, and all the hate and brutality comes from us knowing that. We still have to beg. We’re still the ones having to consider ourselves lucky.’

He got out a smoke, threw Aiden one, and gave a sarcastic laugh.

‘Who was it, calling all arts and efforts made by men nothing but slightly more complex mating rituals? The theatre of it. We should be beyond that. Beyond trying to impress one another, men or women. Only gets in the way. Legacy is grandeur, and for a legacy children have become somewhat of a tedium. Like anything that’s popular they’ve become mass production. So what’s left besides

routines to get oneself laid and pop culture procreation? Anything to leave all this behind. And meanwhile we're allowing ourselves to be neutered.'

Speak loudly of your pride and bitterness, but softly, say that she does not love you, tell me simply!

For a short while after that they explored the back of the place, then left, and soon parted ways. There was no need for James to explain his broody mood, but it was only the first time Aiden would witness it, and that evening he'd some brooding to do on his own. If he was right about this being about Erica, perhaps the two having gotten into a serious fight before he and James had met up, James courageously, pompously at first playing over it until his mood had gotten the better of him, if Aiden guessed correctly he also felt it couldn't be the whole of it. More to do with James himself, James out of any context. Inside the context it also felt like danger.

What is the hyper surface?

The duration was of course the issue that exerted increasing pressure on Aiden. A new beginning without having reached an end. With no way of telling if it would all come back to him. Whether it already had before. Why, if it had. Deciding, for sanity's sake, that the effect was universal, he could look back farther and farther, and see details that may have warranted an inclusion of single memories, enough to drive one crazy all on their own account, eyeing each of them with a new suspicion. It could stretch back years for all he knew, precisely because he didn't. What's to say that the awareness had set in with immediacy. Perhaps he'd been just as blind as everyone else for a long time, years, perhaps even decades, and noticing things was a new thing. It didn't feel that way, but where intuition becomes a liability, feelings are bound to be treacherous.

But if the awareness had set in alongside the earlier distance of what was soon to be concluded without definiteness he could dare a vague estimate. It was still several months long. And not determined by any spot on the globe east or west from the terminator distinguishing night from day. A day on Earth last approximately twenty-four hours. On Mars it's an extra forty minutes, give or take. The terrestrial year is 365 days long, that's Earth days, a year for Neptune is measured in 165 Earth *years*. Given all the opportunities for dilation, one couldn't even name a true universal time, not even as a safe duration. Where you are when is also always how fast you're moving. Fuck with something like that, and it's getting real complicated.

Dilation seemed like one of those master keys, but in order to use them you must first find the lock. To him dilation was the proof that they all got everything terribly wrong. That nothing was the way it seemed to begin with, that they were being deceived in the very basics of their assumptions.

Where 'they' were the bulk of his species those assumptions weren't even as much made as they were simply restated, usually without the help of words even, a false status quo that couldn't be and therefore wasn't, but was believed in nonetheless, thus basically making what most people thought of time and how they perceived it a religion that wasn't thought of as a religion, a superstition that was reality for most. There was a lot people took for granted even though it didn't make the least bit of sense, they thought the sun was yellow, and that the Earth underwent seasons because it moved a little farther away from that yellow sun for winter. Ask the Australians about that, would have been one answer, the Southern hemisphere being what periodically offered the more direct target for infalling sunlight, while snow could be yellow, but for entirely different reasons than the light that hit it.

Tell such people to accept what makes no intuitive sense even to those who do understand it, and resistance is entirely natural, at least in the form of incredulity. Time reveals itself as a reality by means of the incredible. And it can be frightening to see how close it is, no matter where you are and what the conditions of your existence in it are. So tightly interlaced it is with space that it makes itself known not merely in one, but in two ways. It will be seen with velocity. You move faster relative to someone else, time will pass slower for you. A photon will be observed from Earth as it leaves the surface of the sun, and those observing it will measure the time it takes for this journey as roughly eight minutes and twenty seconds. For the photon itself it's different, however. For the photon no time at all passes, for it has no mass, and it's therefore allowed to travel at the speed of

light. Which is where the end of the slow-down is found. Where time stops. Anything still travelling almost as fast, but still not *as* fast, and at that speed *a lot* of time will pass for the thing in question relative to the observer on Earth. Just not for that observer.

And if it's not speed it's gravity. The greater the gravity-well, the more mass it has, and the closer you are to it, the slower time will pass for you relative to somewhere else. You spend time near a black hole, and your twin sibling will be long gone when you return, their generation will be long gone. You combine both, and it may become yet more complicated when you compare it with another place and situation.

Compare. Compare...

Both prerequisites included the need for comparison. As did absolute zero. The speed of light may have been a constant, but the act of observation so wasn't.

Compare... He felt he was close. And that time stood still in his room right then. The quiet was no longer quiet. It was – soundless. If he was to look outside would he see that nothing was moving? Aiden got up, and stepped to the window with icy fear clamping his heart. There was the streetlamp. The shapes of the roofs. Nothing indicated movement. Motion. But nothing would, in any case. He hoped that something would fly across the path between his eyes and the lamp, an insect perhaps, but he could have waited all night for that, and the nights were getting colder. The sky wasn't helping. No clouds. Everything up there, that brilliant vision into the past, a brilliance of which he could see nothing more but a petty trailer, but everything of what he saw up there, back there, was so far away it appeared static. He picked a star, he didn't know which one it was, and he would wait until it reached that roof over there.

The impression persisted, meanwhile. Compare. Compare what? What other thing? Try it. There had been that other thing.

Aiden shook his head. That was wrong. Something was wrong about that. What had he been thinking just now? The act of observation. Right. What about it? *Uncertainty*, the tiny voice whispered. What? *Duality*. What?!

'It's okay. It's okay, let go.'

His eyes are so much closer than they could possibly be. The strain, the immense strain. The dam. They'd been there a bunch of times. The dam during winter, autumn, summer. The large flat. Her parting lips, her thighs, the necklace. The fight. The marina. The place in the wall, the two of them. Pranks and laughter and running. Puffins. The cabin. The Stray God. All those times, all those many times before. All those times without them, without him. The times before the town, the times that mean nothing. A whole childhood.

'Let go.'

The knock was impossibly loud. It swallowed the whole terror, and at once spat it out again. He looked at the star, the edge of that roof. They hadn't gotten closer, not one bit.

A quake. It must have been a quake. He'd experienced it before, something like it, only not this intense. Nothing like it, but in quality it was a quake. And as it had been before, it was so now, all was gone, all feeling normal, reality elusive once again. Life was normal, and if only for this moment.

He only understood that the knocking had been rather tender when it came the second time.

'So, what *is* it?'

'What's what?'

'That surface, the...'

'The hypersurface.'

'Yes. You mentioned it a bunch of time, like I'm just supposed to know.'

'I've been trying to understand it myself for quite some time now.'

'And?'

'I'll need some more of that.'

'I see.' Aiden had the distinct feeling that Miller didn't see. 'Another intractable riddle you've built yourself?'

'I didn't build it. No one did.'

'But you understand what I mean. You find yourself problems you cannot solve, and, with respect, I know I'm dumb in this respect, but you say yourself you're not that much brighter with maths, I'd say there's plenty to find in that field. One way to cheer up, I guess, you can go on like that forever.'

'Yeah, as if I'd need more of *that*...'

'Okay. Try me. I mean, you've been working with it, there must be *something* you understand.'

Aiden sighed because he knew how to convey the gist of it, because he knew it would not be understood, and because he himself did not really comprehend it either. It was a definition, the sort of definition that left you standing in the wind with your dick in your hand.

'If you can, imagine a part of spacetime, a subset, a plane, and that plane is a moment, an instant of time. If this plane is your landscape, it's this scape's initial conditions that determine the past, but also the future. That plane is intersected by every causal curve once.'

He waited for the effect, realising after a few moments that the effect had set in half-way through the explanation, persisting and extending as a blank face.

'Trust me, I sympathise,' was the only thing he could say.

'Perhaps if you told me what significance you see in this?'

'Someone once or twice said it's the unsolvable problem that attracts me.'

'Again, why are you coming here? Now you already got me in the mood, for once I'm willing to listen to your theory in length, and you're backing out from this as well, can you forgive me for being a tad suspicious?'

'The session isn't long enough.'

'Then simplify. You've spent all this time with it, what's the point if you can't even summarise it?'

There's always a way to summarise. I'm doing it frequently myself.'

This time his sigh was long, unintentionally, so he hurried taking her up on it.

'A system's evolution in time is often represented as a cone, a light cone...'

'Hang on, have we left the hypersurface?'

'Bear with me?'

'Sorry.'

'Any single point on any imaginary line would be what we call an event. Imagine the cone made of all possible lines an object *could* take. The *actual* trajectory, the path that the object *does* take is called the worldline.'

'Reality?'

'Since we're talking a simplified summary, yeah. A worldline as you and I are imagining it every given blossoming Sunday is timelike, the cone points forward in time. We're assuming in this context that an object cannot exist in two locations at the same time, and that it cannot willy-nilly change positions – it moves progressively forward. I think of it as a definition of event: motion through time. By necessity forward. That's causality. Tell you the truth, I'm already not sure if that isn't *too* simplified.'

As if opposed to the line of thought, Aiden had the feeling as if he was moving away from the point he was trying to make, backwards.

'However. This may work out fine on flat spacetime.'

'What you mean? Flat. Didn't you tell me that it curves?'

'You see the problem. I mean, I'm not sure if I see it. I might be totally wrong here, it's an intuitive take by a layman, but something will seem flat locally while as a whole it's not because it's...'

'Big.'

'Right. Not sure that's how it's meant, but for the sake of it. But apparently this is demonstrated by dilation. A close vicinity to a star, for example, will exert gravity on the object, drag it closer, so it's future worldline now also lies closer to the star. The cone is being tilted. The object falling around the star will continue on its path, but to an outside spectator it will appear to accelerate. Tilted enough, there'll be events as seen by the external observer that are actually past events. Tilted ever more, and you'll have one or more cones loop back on themselves. That's the best I can do by way of trying to explain that closed timelike curves may be permitted. What's unsettling is that such a

curve may violate causality in a way that an event may become its own cause. Basically a disconnected worldline.'

There was a pause after this, and Aiden was forever grateful that he didn't know whether or not Miller would grapple for a smoke. She didn't.

'Right. So. There's that. I'm not sure I understand...'

'You'd be quicker than I am.'

'...I probably don't, but so far, so good. What I take from this is that you found yourself a way to tell yourself that what you fear is happening *can* happen. And where to from here?'

'I have no idea about you, but as for me, what I'm telling myself is that it *shouldn't* happen. And I can tell you, that's a lot harder to swallow. You think that somehow, somewhere I want this. I really, really so don't.'

'Would surprise me if you would. Wouldn't be a point in that, would it.'

'What you mean?'

'That the point is that it's got to be something that terrifies you? Something before which you stand completely powerless? Something you cannot do anything about, except futilely trying without end?'

'Oh. I see.'

'Good! Sounds like progress after all.'

'No. On the contrary, sound like you changing your mind.'

'You mean the coming cataclysm, the disaster, the collapse you're working towards with such dedication? Haven't forgotten it, no. Just that it's even better, isn't it. The big catastrophe is approaching, and it will again and again and again. You've discovered yourself the ultimate hell, my friend. In a way, it's impressive. It *is* impressive. Now, how are we going to pull you out of it?'

Try as you might. They say, if your own wife doesn't believe you, your own mother, father, best friend. Try shrink. Of course he understood. It was part of the regular sanity check, see if you still get why she won't believe it. Who would. He wouldn't.

'It must be a familiar feature, clients of yours having a different idea about that than you.'

'In the beginning, always. You talked about how long it is. Duration. You said that you can't be sure, that the awareness had come gradually, and you extrapolate from this that it extends farther back than when you became aware. But let's assume for the moment that it doesn't. That it began for you the moment you became aware. That first thought. The first time it entered your head, quietly at first, as an idea in the margin. Is it really so hard to see how this rhymes with any other obsessive idea? How obsessions begin and evolve?'

'No, it's not. As I told you, time and time again, I gave this good consideration. I thought I was going nuts.'

'But now you don't think that anymore. But if you were, when would that word, or any better for that matter, when would it apply better, when one is still grappling with it, or when one has decided on how things are, and when one is no longer concerned with the possibility of one's own mental incompetence?'

'If you ask yourself whether you're mad you probably aren't, but once you stop asking yourself...'

'More or less. What I find telling is the timing. As you'll probably know. The first time, the first time the thought came up, it was very shortly after, wasn't it?'

'No. That was when the *déjà* became undeniable. The frequency.'

'You're mincing. It was shortly after, and it's because of the *déjà*-experiences that the thought came, and from there...'

'Next you'll ask me if I believe it all happens because of that. Which is the same as asking whether I believe it happens because of *me*.'

'No, you manage that quite without me.'

'Make that a past tense, for whatever the past is worth. Yes, I have asked myself that, but not as it would relate to me. The question what could cause time to go out of joint can only be plausibly answered with a wrong. And if it happens in a temporal proximity with something I've witnessed as being wrong, it's hard to avoid the question, to be tempted to link the two. But we've lived through

two world wars and almost a third, through countless genocides, the climate is changing as it had never before, never this fast, and never for a comparable reason. In a way you could define human history as something that's repeatedly gone wrong on a massive scale, and it'd be a little self-centred to look at one personal event, something that happened between four people, one suicide, and that should be the thing causing it. Still, you'll wonder. Just overall: could there be something so wrong that it could cause this. You know. Just really *wrong*. And there's the rub. What may be considered wrong in the unflinching eyes of the universe would probably be something entirely different than all the wrongs we can see, seeming so massive, so big to us. Wrong for the universe has nothing to do with ethics, or grief. Wrong for the universe would mean something that simply wasn't supposed to happen. And here we've arrived at the debacle.'

'What debacle?'

'Something not supposing to happen, something that's possible by natural laws, but not *supposed* to happen. That would point at a future that isn't merely deterministic. It'd be a future already determined.'

'I'm fucking fed up with people whom I've met a hundred times before in others.'

James had gradually grown more tense over the span of a couple of days. It had nothing to do with their night at that place, it had only first become apparent then. Tension didn't air with James the same way as it did with others, most of the time there'd be nothing Aiden noticed, the lust for sarcasm and deprecating was inherent in James in any case, and nothing about his posture changed. James had a knack for lounging where ever he'd lower himself. And there was the sense of disillusionment and dissatisfaction Aiden had seen from the beginning. Little made itself noticeable, and it was more during the periods when James wasn't talking that Aiden could sense it.

The initial period of the quartet doing things together was at least interrupted, not for any other reason than daily demands. They still felt themselves as the quartet, and it was due to neither James nor Aiden working that it was them who'd spend a lot more time together, and Aiden didn't complain. They spend so much time together, in fact, that he felt like the number two for James after Erica, and since Erica *was* working the governing conclusion wasn't concerned with her, but suggested that James didn't like alone-time all that much.

They'd played their analysing game in the relatively new venue in Cannon Gardens, a two-floor affair with a narrow balcony and an extra upstairs bar above which, curiously, and perhaps modelled on American bars, a television set remained turned on at all times. Sitting in one of the balcony corners they'd done their best not to conceal what they were doing, as usual, and had not shied away from picking people in earshot about whom they'd give each other a short round-up as pertaining their personalities. Short being the key-word, short, with a rather indulging emphasis that each one could only *be* short. The three at the neighbour table, one woman, two blokes, had already revisited the feeling of someone talking about you in the third person while you're in the room, and the men had started staring at them with according intensity.

'Garden variety neurotic,' James had opined, with neither of them granting the one with the black-rimmed glasses a single other look after the initial and, again, short glance needed for establishing. 'It's in the eyes, a sort of sick intensity typical of neurotics, there's only the thinnest veil between the enlarged pupils and some perverted passion behind them. Largely enhanced by his unrequited lusting for his friend's girl. What you think of her?'

'Nervous. Lack of confidence, insincere. The scant choice of fashion accessories and smart clothes is supposed to trick the beholder into believing she's culturally sophisticated, but she's probably with the guy because she's regularly with some kind of artist because she herself can't pull it off.' The woman was very much not staring, but eating with pronounced patience.

'So you think he's an artist?'

'Yeah, but you know, the easy kind. More to do with selling himself. The way he talks fits the way he presents himself, nose high, some fancy words, everybody will believe you're intellectually superior and the stuff you're doing is profound. Which is how you make it.'

'Not bad. And you're right, but I'm biased here.'

‘How so?’

‘I’ve seen his stuff.’

‘And?’

‘Pretentious bull crap. You hit the nail.’

It was remarkable that neither of them complained or even attempted to address them. Perhaps it had to do with him and James attending the matter so demonstratively without them and over their own salads that a scene inevitably arising from disturbing their privacy wasn’t worth it. After all, they had the right to talk about what they wanted.

They’d gone one by one with every other guest in view, excluding the waitress as with waiting staff there was always the chance that they’d spit in your drink. They weren’t *really* analysing them with the confidence of extraordinarily talented late afternoon series forensic psychiatrist heroes, only used the gist of what was plausible, the aim of the game was to entertain. Some might have said they were afraid of getting bored, and they wouldn’t have been able to deny, as they never even got a chance to get bored in the first place. Running out, they’d directed their attention to the telly. And James’ much sharper remark was addressing an American television producer who was being interviewed about a final season.

‘Like her work, would hate having to talk to her. It’s all status quo with her. If you look at her, success for her isn’t so much that series. It’s being one of the others, and excelling at that. Being normal. And from there having commercial success. Making it. She’s the kind of friend who’ll take your side when you fuck up, not the friend who’ll tell you you fucked up. Desplicable.’

This was more serious, James genuinely seemed to hate her.

‘I bet if you’d tell her that in her face she’d say you have a problem with Asians. Because, you know. Can’t possibly be that it’s about *her*. Can’t possibly be that someone doesn’t like *her*, it would have to be the fact that she’s of Asian heritage. So you tell her, nothing to do with that. You’re American as far as I’m concerned. Ah, so you don’t like Americans. And *siiiiigh*.’

There it was again. That hint of darkness. Not so much in what he said, though there was that. He was so serious all of a sudden.

‘Let’s get the fuck outta here.’

It was an issue, of course, that one. Both of them, the recognition of what James said he’d seen multiple times before in what was supposed to be a true original individual, and what he believed to be a crappy friend, the friend who’d take your side no matter what, instead of being straight with you. Take your side, unless it would involve them, and of course they’re quick to involve themselves if it didn’t. A sickness of this town especially, he’d say. Sometimes Aiden wondered why he stuck around, he certainly had the means to go anywhere he liked. He never asked him, never felt right. It could very well be that he’d already been, been elsewhere, he thought. And it had just been more of the same.

Later, and he couldn’t be sure in retrospect when exactly, not the same day, a couple days later, it might have been after he and James had been back at the cabin and watching puffins in the cliffs, puffins who should not have been this far south, but later, anyway, he’d addressed his impression when he’d found himself alone with Erica. She’d been in the flat that evening, might have been after they’d returned from puffin-spotting, and she’d told James that so-and-so was in town, and he needed to meet with James right away, and yes, never mind that it was late. James had put his finger in his mouth, but that person wanting to see him was apparently tantamount to a command, and he’d excused himself. It had cost Aiden some courage to bring up the matter, and Erica had not reacted the way he’d thought she would. First she’d revealed who so-and-so was without being prompted, the family’s legal council, apparently James’ dad had thrown a fit over something James had done, and Erica guessed he was about to cut him out of the will. The way she said it she seemed to all but omit an ‘again’.

She’d poured the two of them a drink from James’ extensive liquor reservoir, and had slumped down across him.

‘It’s a matter of principle with him.’ Erica had looked out the window, taking a bit of a too large sip from her Scotch. ‘Trying his best to throw away his fortune.’

'He's got integrity.'

'That's such a load of crap in one word. There's no integrity in that. It's outright immoral. The whole country's busting its ass just to get by. He doesn't want the money? Think of what good he could do with it. Integrity my ass. Self-indulgence is what it is.'

'I don't know anything about the specifics, so...'

'That's right, you don't.'

Straight into awkwardness. Aiden hadn't spent much of real time alone with her, and now he was intimidated. Fearful of angering her with ignorance. Trying to think of something useful to say.

'You really do love him, don't you? Totally smitten, right? Bathing in the light? That's alright, everyone is, everyone who doesn't become a target of his little Oscar Wilde routine.'

He had the feeling that she'd already had one or two of these.

'Are you two alright? Not that it's any of my busi...'

'...any of my business. It's okay, you can ask. Ask if not everything's peachy in Camelot. You think everything's got to be right and perfect between mommy and daddy?'

'I don't think there's such a relationship, I don't think of you two in those terms, and frankly I find that a bit patronising.'

'Oh, good, now we're talking. Not just taking it. Just had a rough evening before, is all. Mommy and daddy will be alright. What about you, what about your relationship?'

'Mine?'

'With daddy.'

'Daddy seems a bit stressed lately.'

'About?'

'If I knew.'

'Then relax about it.'

'Yeah, I don't want to relax about it, he's my friend, I don't know how I can be there for him if I don't know what's going on with him.'

'Oh, you wanna rescue him now? Stand with him, a real friend.'

'That's right. You two must have had a serious fight, otherwise I wouldn't know how you can be this sarcastic about it. I think there are some signs of depression. I've seen it before.'

'So have I, plenty of experience in this regard. What can you do.'

'What can you *do*? Make sure it's not getting out of hands, for starters. He's the type who'll try bracing it by putting on a heroic face so no one will notice, and one day we might have a bad awakening.'

'Type? I didn't know that he's a type.'

'You know what I mean.'

'Here's what I know. The way you struggle says something about you. Either you put up a fight, or you'll relish in self-destruction. What *type* you think he is? He's got problems, all right, well spotted. Does it look to you like he's dealing? No, he's letting it all fall apart. How very male.'

'And that's some bullshit there as well. That myth of the destructive male and the creative woman.'

'Whatever.'

He'd never have thought he'd be getting angry with her when they had entered the flat. Never thought he'd get angry with her at all. The round table of the four knights had some serious cracks he hadn't noticed.

'I think I better head off. Thanks for the drink.'

'Hey. Relax.' Erica extended a sock to kick his. 'No need to get all snarly. To be frank, remember?' She threw out a chin towards the bottle, and Aiden got up to replenish them both.

'He's a self-pitier, is what I'm saying. That's where all that cynicism is coming from.'

'Now you sound as if you loath him.'

'I'm pulling my weight, okay? This is called venting. Thought you were my friend, too. You've know me for longer, after all.'

'Hardly.'

‘That’s right, it’s you two who spend all this time together. Since you have it. Ever thought of inviting *me* out? Just me? Yeah, right. We’re this couple. Where I go he shall. He spends plenty of time on his own, so do I.’

‘You’re working. When you’re not it only makes sense if we do things together. I thought I’d mention what I think I see to you so we can find a way to help him, maybe that was a mistake. But I want to. Thinking you’re his girlfriend, so you might be interested in being there for him when he needs you.’

‘But I am. What do you know? What about what *I* need?’

‘Right, since you don’t want to sound as if you’re self-pitying.’

‘Fuck you. He’s gonna be alright. You’re blowing things out of proportions. Samaritan-complex. He’s gonna be fine.’

‘Hard to see how you can be certain about this if you don’t even care that much.’

‘Excuse me, I care. I’m saying you don’t need to worry, he’s still able of taking care of himself. Don’t be his nanny. He’d like one, and it’s not good for him. And stop idealising him.’

‘We’re friends, a bit of idealising another is part of the deal, it’s not as if one needs to worship. And I’d like to think he can rely on me. I’m pretty sure I can rely on him.’

There was a pause, which was terribly quiet.

‘That you can. Yes.’

Why she would make it sound bitter was his guess.

‘I better get going.’

‘No, stay. Hey. Stay, alright? We’re not having a fight, are we. Just, he doesn’t need a baby sitter. And I can sure do with a chat, without him constantly going in with some witticism.’

‘Why are you so resentful?’

‘Welcome to the reality of a relationship, how many have you been in where the downs don’t outnumber the ups.’

‘It’s just that...’

‘It never looks that way, I know. Normally we don’t take it outside the house for a walk. You don’t talk about these things unless it’s with other girls.’

‘Then perhaps we should leave it at that.’

‘You’re right. Let’s not talk about James. Damn, once he’s out, and we’re still talking about him. Like there’s nothing else to talk about than the centre of the galaxy.’

She poured them another round, and Aiden really wasn’t sure he wanted one. Even when she was baneful she was stunning. The kind of girl who’d known short hair to be her look since she was fifteen. Olive skin. No need for much jewellery because she was a jewel all by herself. You’re blessed with so much beauty, grace will follow suit without studying it. She’d kept her foot close to his and was now poking it with her big toe.

‘You’re way too serious about things. So what about you and girls? Never seen you with any.’

‘Perhaps I’m too gay for James.’

‘No, you’re not.’

Poking.

‘Do-on’t you think I don’t know. You and Jamie.’

‘Me and Jamie?’

‘You and Jamie, I.’

‘Without wanting to sound like your grandmother, but that’s the last one for you.’

‘So strict. Jamie had a crush on me before he started wanking.’

‘Okay.’

‘It’s true. I noticed.’

The poking now became a soft stroke up his sole.

‘What is this?’

‘What is what?’

Aiden withdrew his foot.

'Right. You're pissed with James, for whatever reason, and now you want to get even with him. I've seen *that* before as well, and I don't need it.'

'No, but you want it.'

'And I thought we can all rely on each other. I can't believe you're doing this. He's my friend.'

'Oh, it's gonna be fine. He's gonna be fine.'

Luckily she was now pissed with him.

'Yeah, and you know that.'

'Yeah. I do.'

Crack. Aiden got up.

'Whatever it is that's going on between the two of you, this is bullshit. You're drunk, as they always use it as an excuse...'

'Who's *they*?'

'You're trying to play us off against each other? You got the man. I wish I'd be half the man he is.'

Erica scoffed. It came out as a spout of incredulous laughter along with a tiny gob of spit.

'Yeah. *Right*.'

'Have a sleep, have a good talk with James. Leave me out of this.'

'Oh, who's playing daddy now! It's nothing to do with you.'

'Fine. The better. Good night.'

'Yeah, good, leave, go home.'

'I will.'

Aiden had wanted to slam the door, but thought better of it. Already half the way down he realised he wasn't just angry with Erica. That's the thing with happiness. Why it's always limited. That's the way with friendship, too. It doesn't need a foreign element to mess with it. Drama is a primordial ingredient. We don't really like happy endings.

'Watch an eight ball on an even surface as it's being hit by another eight ball at an angle. The eight ball that's been hit rolls off on a trajectory differing from that of the ball that has hit it. On its new path there is a wormhole, and it rolls right into it. The wormhole is the mouth that leads it back onto the plane, still rolling, and it hits another eight ball at an angle.'

'The other eight ball. It's the same?'

'There's only one eight ball.'

'So where does it begin?'

'It doesn't. The eight ball causes its own motion.'

'A trapped eight ball.'

'That depends. It could be that the premise is flawed. Or that there's another one.'

'Which one?'

'The one in which the eight ball gets knocked into the wormhole and thus emerges on a path different from that on which it had moved.'

Aiden had put his ear close to the door to listen out, only to have the next knocking, not louder, but uncomfortably closer to his eardrum. He knew who it was, from her knocking.

'We've been here before.'

'I know. You just gonna walk off without inviting me in?'

'The door's open, isn't it.'

Aiden walked into his room and straight to what amounted to his mini bar. A bottle and a couple of glasses on the window sill.

'It's smelly in here. Yeah, thanks, I'll have one, too... What *is* all this?'

He filled her glass, but left it on the sill and pointed at it.

'Where is all your stuff?'

'Got rid of it.'

'If you need tips for decorating, because you're doing it wrong. I didn't know you were a maths geek.'

'It's a new hobby.'

'Is there anywhere to sit?'

'Pick a spot.'

She did, by remaining leaning against the window sill, taking in the room's new, chaotic look.

'Gee, didn't think you could reach James' messy-level.'

'Don't talk about him. You have no right.'

'I have every fucking right in the world to talk about any fucking thing I want.'

'What do you want?'

'Seeing what's up with you? You're being missed, you know? I know you don't care for me, but. Your old friend?'

'So the trio is still up and running, to two thirds.'

'I guess. Yeah. Occasionally. No one else there, you know. Are you holding me responsible?'

'Not my place. *I'm* responsible.'

'Yeah, I can see how you'd think that.'

'By all means, tell me about my thoughts, since you're the specialist.'

'I mean,' Erica let her arm and glass swing round, 'all this. This worries me.'

Aiden had caught himself before saying that she sounded like his shrink. It wasn't an impression-thing, he didn't give a damn about what other people would think, nor had it anything to do with him not wanting other people to worry or jump into conclusions. It simply wasn't her business. Nothing about him was anymore.

'You don't wanna be worried. Not you. Easiest thing for you, don't look, so...'

'So what is all that?'

Monkey says, monkey doesn't listen.

'Not an exhibition. It doesn't concern you.'

'Right. So it's just you going any kind of conspiracy-bonkers. You could put up some red twine.'

'I considered it. Are we done?'

'Are you gonna talk to him? He's your oldest friend left. Since apparently I'm not your friend anymore.'

'That you're not a friend isn't even my decision, it's just a given, you just aren't friend material.'

'Thanks for that.'

He hadn't even meant to hurt her. Now that he saw how it had landed he felt a curious sensation of delight in retrospect. Nothing sadistic. Nothing to do with revenge. Just the dark joy of hurting someone for the sole purpose of exposing oneself to the echo, to have the act fly back, and to experience this pain almost simultaneously to the address it was really intended for.

'He knows where I live. Known that longer than you, remember? So what for does he need an ambassador?'

'That's not why I'm here. I just mention it, because, you know. He doesn't come because he doesn't know what to say, with you not wanting to see anyone. Not making a step. Not coming to the funeral.'

'Did he say that?'

'No, but that's how it goes.'

'Bullshit. You don't even know him. He doesn't come because he agrees with me. Sometimes being a friend means that a friendship will end, but you wouldn't know anything about that, would you. It's always about honesty. And he agrees with me.'

'About you being responsible?'

'But if the eight ball's course is being changed so it won't hit itself, there'd be no cause for it to exist. Or else there'd be two.'

'So you prefer the first version.'

'Prefer? No. I accept it before the other. Because you said it. Self-consistency. Why shouldn't it apply where the event is its own cause?'

When it then did happen after all Aiden had been more frightful of Jamie than of James, oddly. He knew that Jamie would disapprove, of course. He had no idea to what extent, though.

To his surprise Jamie knew. Somehow. Not from anywhere or anyone else. He just knew instantly the moment Aiden walked through the front door. He didn't say anything at first. But he knew. Jamie's flat had always struck him as nuts. Single large room, the kitchen serving as well as hall, tiny bathroom, and everything but the kettle seemed to be largely disregarded by an absent mind. Where this mind was most of the time would be evident to anyone entering. For a bookworm the lack of any bookshelves may have seemed odd, but perhaps a shelf would have granted some books more value while shaming the vast majority. Jamie had a bed, and he had books. Books in stacks, books lining the ledges, books as actual piles. Several books on the bed, as if he was cuddling with them at night. There was a tiny book of limericks near the toilet for brief sessions, a thin ornithological work for medium ones, a copy of Bulgakov's Theatrical Novel for longer efforts (it looked well-read, but readings had perhaps occurred at other locations) and 'War and Peace' for the more epic events. The first time Aiden had been invited over for a cuppa he'd looked about himself and stated, 'yeah, man. You read.'

Jamie's face had dropped the instance he'd opened the door.

'Uh. What an honour. Come in.'

Aiden had come in, understanding the reception in one way, and wondering whether he should ask what Jamie could mean, but decided not to insult his friend. He'd proceeded into the room while Jamie had put the kettle on, dropping the tea bags into the mugs. Both of them drank it the same way, a splash of milk, no sugar.

'I'm sorry that I haven't come around in a while. Bit too focused on spending time with James, it just overlapped with when you're free.'

'S'alright. You two got a lot more time on your hands, since neither of you are working.'

'Yeah. Yeah, that's what I meant...'

'Can only mean that you got something on your mind that you finally got around to it.'

Aiden had gone to see Jamie for no other reason but to see him, he'd told himself, now he understood that this wasn't quite true.

'What d'you mean? Man, I just haven't seen you in a while, is all. What you're reading?'

'Couple things. So you've slept with Erica?'

Aiden was glad the tea was still too hot, had he had a sip he'd have choked on the hot brew. Jamie held an icy stare. There was no point denying, and it hadn't occurred to him before how much this may hurt him.

'Well.'

'And what is James thinking about it, or are you two just assuming it's gonna be a happy ménage à trois?'

That was something Aiden *had* invested some thought in, with no return so far. He'd remembered James' words regarding Aiden's affection for her he'd noticed, kept remembering them now, and he didn't believe in their sincerity. It had just happened, and it had only happened a day before he'd gone to Jamie's, and for him it was no question that it'd stay this one time, believing, for no other reason than that it was the sensible thing to do, that Erica was of one mind with him on this, but even more so because of his anger. That still left the one time. Lying felt out of the question. So he had avoided James the evening before and this day so far. He instructed himself in not letting that shit slide, he couldn't avoid him forever, didn't want to, and going out of his way to continue avoiding him would clarify the situation by itself, anyway, and it would reveal him as a coward. Theirs wasn't that type of a friendship. And if it ended this way, it better ended with them looking each other in the eyes.

The previous afternoon there'd been a knock on his door, and he'd listened out before opening as the knock had at once sounded familiar and unfamiliar, the latter because the fist had never rapped at this door before. She'd looked angry, impatient.

'Don't tell me. You two had a row.'

'Very nice to see you, Erica. Here's your drink, Erica. Why don't you have a seat, Erica.'

‘Why don’t you have a seat, Erica.’

‘Can you make it a double?’

‘By all means.’

‘We’re all drinking far too much whisky.’

‘Jamie doesn’t. What’s on your mind?’

She’d looked around at his pathetic quarters. The jury had entered to pass judgement. Being with James should have gotten her used to a minimum of luxury, but also disorder to battle.

‘Guys don’t know what to do with their homes.’

‘Yeah, you know, I don’t feel apologetic about it. Just to avoid any false impressions, I’m not asking you to tell me about the specifics, I’m not your relationship counsel.’

‘I’m not asking you to be. What’s it like when you two are alone? You telling him the same?’

‘It may surprise you, and perhaps insult you, but you’re generally not the number one topic.’

‘Why should that insult me? The fuck are you thinking of me, that I think of myself as the centre of the galaxy?’

‘Didn’t mean it that way...’

‘Then what way? But anyway, yeah, suits him, he wouldn’t talk about me if I’m not in the room.’

‘Then let’s remain with that, because I’m the same.’

‘Wonderful. An afternoon without James, not even in mentioning. Could do with that.’

Aiden was not aware that he’d invited her to stay for the afternoon. He was still a bit bitter about the advance the other day, and uncomfortable about being alone with her in his flat.

‘You’re not joining me?’

Aiden already had a couple before she came, so no, he didn’t particularly want to join her.

‘Very well.’

Which, Aiden would think afterwards, is how this goes. Alcohol had been around since ever. What did the Greeks, the Romans, what did they use the excuse of alcohol for? Probably similar infidelities. Cases of manslaughter. Damaged properties. ‘I’m sorry, I was drunk.’ An inebriated driver, crashing into another car, surviving, but some in the other car don’t. ‘Sorry. I was drunk.’ There’s laws for that, and those laws don’t care about the excuse either. Anything for which there aren’t laws, you don’t even need it. But you may still make it.

It wasn’t earth-shattering. It wasn’t the most exciting, most beautiful thing he’d ever experienced, and it was more than fair to think it had been the same for her. Nothing either of them couldn’t have lived with. So why? Because he was drunk. In the very least he could tell himself that, not that it worked any better than at any time since antiquity.

Erica didn’t need excuses. She was sobering up in a different way, and it had nothing to do with regrets. It can be a sorry affair, the aftermath. Reality. She didn’t stay for the night. Collecting her clothes, her boots, dressing and straightening herself in the bathroom, him thinking of the corners that hadn’t been cleaned since forever in there. Are you alright, and a quiet, almost surprised ‘yeah.’ And ‘are you?’ Sure he was, he lied. Everything about her ceremony of leaving was so mundane, it was embarrassing, and it was a relief when she was finally ready to go. He’d stayed naked in bed the whole time, not daring to get out as he’d probably stood around like a loaf. He’d asked her whether she wanted coffee. This, and everything he’d done while they’d been making what wasn’t love, it was all awkward and clumsy attempts to please, he’d compared his abilities in this respect with social media algorithms before.

‘You’re asking yourself how you’re comparing to him.’

It was a statement, and it infuriated him, and naturally the question hung in the air. For both of them. Or not. Erica went on to speak the words for which he’d hate her, truly hate her. That there was no reason, there never is, and particularly not where James was concerned, because as a lover he was quite the opposite of how he appeared in society, and that it was not a physical problem, had more to do with confidence, believe it or not. Aiden would tell her several times to shut up, he didn’t want to hear this shit, but it was as if she didn’t hear him. Why do they do this? Why do they think they have to? Why do people always think they have to talk, and to hell with the consequences? To unburden themselves? And? Do they feel unburdened? Do they?

When she'd ended she'd stopped in her motion and looked at him as if remembering that he was there.

'I probably shouldn't have said that.'

'You *think*?'

After she was gone he still didn't get up. For a long time he felt frozen to his mattress. Thinking one word over and over. Shit.

'I don't. You start with that shit, there's no end to it. You'll always find something to blame yourself. People are responsible for their own actions, doesn't just go for you, it was the same for him.'

'Yeah, that's a way out.'

'You couldn't have known.'

'No. But I could have been more responsible then. Instead of feeling responsible after. That changes nothing.'

'You *are* holding me responsible.'

'I'm not in the position. If I was I'd say you knew enough. Just as I did. Enough to avoid something unnecessary. Once we know we're involved, like it or not. And what's there not to like with someone this close.'

'People don't off themselves because one thing. One thing, no matter how much it hurts. He was an adult.'

'Yeah. I agree. But what does that change? That much was known from the start. That one thing, there was a whole lot more behind, in the end that whole lot is the one thing. And we knew. You knew before I did.'

'But you *didn't* know when you've slept with her, did you. She knew, but not you. Not until she told you, and not until James basically confirmed it.'

'I didn't expect the old make the patient feel better no matter what-routine from you. If we judge wrongs by the damage they do, perhaps. I think people are being let off the hook often enough.'

'I didn't say you should be. You betrayed a friend, there's no way around. Hardly a capital crime.'

'Isn't it? Then what is? If betraying friendships isn't worth the bother, then why are treason and perjury? Besides, it were two friendships.'

'Yes, but you're here because of the consequence. What you see as the consequence. And it feels worse than treason, doesn't it. I feels like murder. But Erica is right. You couldn't have known to what this led. And you're not responsible for someone else's entire life story.'

'No. I'm here because I'm beyond thinking I'm going crazy. And I want to know how to deal with that. Maths have failed me. Philosophy has failed me. I'm not sure what I expected from you, but where do I go from here? A fucking priest?'

'And yet, here I am, thinking there's a reason why you've gone here and not to a church, and that it's a good reason.'

'Course you'd think that. Guess how the priest would feel about it.'

'You have a headache?'

'No. No headache. It's just... Time's about to run out. And it feels as if there's just this one moment, stretching indefinitely, just one moment, not a succession of moments, one seamlessly leading into the next, but one moment, and everything's crammed into it. It's unbearable. I don't know how I bear it. Except that there's no alternative.'

'You're having a moment, don't you.'

'I was having a moment before I came in. The whole fucking day. I'm having it almost all the time now. Everything, every sight, every word, even my thoughts.'

'Close to the edge, and *almost* looking beyond it. I have dug around a little, and what you're experiencing isn't totally unheard of.'

'I knew you'd say that...'

'Yes, there are two variations that serve as precedent, one which we have to rule out, but I don't think it's that. But just in case. It happened to patients with temporal lobe epilepsy. You're nodding, you know what this is?'

'No..., just go ahead.'

'I'll arrange for another EEG and...'

'MRI, I showed you the results.'

'Just to make sure. To rule it out. The other variant is more interesting. A little more like your case. And everything suggests that it's...'

'Stress-related.'

'Yes. I've reached out to someone, and if you don't mind I'd like you to talk to him.'

'Since we have all the time in the world.'

'Since, yes. Would it burn you to ashes to consider that you might be the last person with an objective view on it? After all...'

'The deluded won't accept that he's deluded.'

'Quite right. One difference between you and those cases, and there aren't many. They had been very aware of the nature of their déjà experiences. They knew what they were, that there was something wrong with them, not the world.'

'Alright, alright. I'm going to see your professor. I can't promise you there'll be enough time, though. Were those recent, those cases? Imagine they were mistaken. I mean, in thinking...'

'Yes, I understand. Sorry, what did you just say?'

'I asked whether they're recent. Those cases. Because...'

'No. Before that.'

'I said I'll go and see him.'

'See who?'

'Your professor.'

'I didn't say he's a professor.'

'No, but you were about to. Told you. Steadily across the edge. And that he was *your* professor. Do I glimpse a micro-fragment of what I'm going through? Ah, this is awkward. Lemme guess. Is *lucky chance* what you're thinking?'

The Ouroboros is just a serpent eating its own tail. Serving as a symbol. Where this has anything to do with time it relates to cycles, like the cycles of seasons, or menstrual cycles. The return of likewise appearance, not time itself. As a circle the Ouroboros shows definite ends, although its chewing on one of them. And it may be that as a symbol it had been directly observed: certain snakes, when in captivity and stressed, rat snakes, for example, may begin eating themselves in Ouroboros manner. So it didn't serve well in Aiden's case.

There was the plain circle, the eight, or quite simply any simple or complicated structure on which the traveller would return whence he'd started. They were all nice and fascinating, but they had a drawback where this was to be applied to actual events. You walk in a circle, or along an eight-shape, and you'll eventually return to the point from where you'd begun walking. If you'd leave it at that you'd have made no attempt explaining how you got on the circle or the eight to begin with. You stepping onto the trace marked the event that triggered the situation. But what if you couldn't remember stepping onto it? You might start wondering eventually. Or walking in a circle forever just strikes you as the most natural thing in the world.

Yet neither symbol or model incorporated a suggestion for any future point on that route causing a past one, or even those points being one and the same. Aiden could have taken a pedantic position, stating that, whatever the cause, if the shape was only the shape it was because the event of walking it described it, then yes, starting at one particular point caused the return to it, which would forever cause returns, but he'd then take the even more pedantic viewpoint of this still demanding an ultimate cause, namely his entering this particular ring- or eight-shaped path. A causal curve in its own respect wasn't enough, unless it would have existed forever.

The only other option was a reset. Did a reset constitute a loop? In effect, perhaps, but not in shape. A reset that wasn't circular or eight-shaped or what have you would allow a connect that wasn't fluent. It circumvented the troubles with tail and mouth causing each other. At a certain point the flow of time stopped, to begin where it had passed already. And with the reset all memory was being wiped, because you at that earlier point are the same you'd been when at this earlier point, with no recollection of what is about to happen, because you've lived through it in a future that's a past you can no longer remember as you haven't yet experienced this past.

Which just felt highly dissatisfying.

There were times when all Aiden wanted to do is to let it go. Everything pointed at a moment to arrive, no matter what, and he'd reach the end, and start at the beginning, and he could only hope that something would stick, but in the end there was nothing he could do. Those moments would die with every quake, and they soon became near extinct with the growing intensity of the quakes. They left him with slowly subsiding terror, and he'd emerged with one of the oldest questions in this story. If there was really nothing he could do, then why did he know?

Accident, said the tiny voice, almost above a whisper. A fluke, a glitch. A kink in the kink. All systems have them. All orders. Is it really this surprising that chaos should have them?

But this isn't chaos, he'd answer the voice. It may have begun with an incidence of chaos, it may have been triggered by chaos, it might be because there'd been a threat of chaos, forcing the system to reconfigure itself. The reconfiguration, though, isn't chaos. Quite the opposite. It's a tendency for order that feels, in lack of a better word, almost manic.

Be it as it may, he thought, a looping or resetting, the point of the Connect was approaching, he was approaching it, and like the atoms in a nebula incited by a nearby star to glow, something in his brain was lighting up, something sensitive to all this, and through the nebulous enigma he was moving closer to the star, pulled in by its gravity, inevitable gravity. He moved almost as a different being, different from everyone else, all those who could not see. He saw a different world. A world where things had become not only predictable, but only predictable, if yet only for a matter of seconds. The *déjà vu*, the *déjà vécu*, had become a *déjà connu*, and they were no longer lasting, were no longer outlasting what had once been normal, a living without monition, they had replaced it. In Miller's office the liquid on the table finally closed over the few remaining dry spots, covering it all, the motion halted, and it was all a smooth and still surface, cold and frozen.

Aiden looked at a mountain range before him in the distance. It seemed far away, and distorted, or simplified, he couldn't quite tell which. When he panned he saw the range expanded, possibly beyond his field of vision. Between the mountains and him was what he stood on, and he felt an edge, *the edge* right behind him. He first thought it was a lake, an unusually smooth lake, disconcertingly smooth, and dark, almost black, but it appeared to be reflective. He tried to look above him, to see what was being reflected, but found he could not. He was disturbed and frightened, and felt urged to keep control. He tried with observation. The lake was not a lake, for he could stand on it. The air, if air it was, felt neither cold nor warm, thus it wasn't ice. A smooth desert ending at the mountains. But there were limits to it. Although the mountain range extended into western and eastern directions, and was bound seamlessly to the smooth desert, and the desert should have broadened with it, the limit was visible. A square, by all impression perfect. Try as he might, he could not see beyond it. Nothing to obscure the view, nothing would prevent him. He just could not. From the centre of the desert a faint shaft of light grew, taller and taller the more he raised his face, taller than what he had expected, to show no end where he no longer could see. He hadn't noticed it growing. He hadn't noticed it at first. But it might have always been there. It was not vertically pointing at a celestial high noon, but stretched at the one o'clock angle, or a little before, and now he saw two other, even fainter shafts, one that shot straight up, one other at an angle closer to the three o'clock. He tried to analyse his fear. Reached a conclusion with immediacy. There was no one here. There was nothing here. There was no one elsewhere. There was a thought. You can only be alone when someone's somewhere. Some place else. But there was no such place. Thus 'alone' was just a word. And a word alone cannot describe it. And it wasn't this alone.

Something closer to him. There was the edge behind him, but something that began beside him, a step forward and a little to the left. Began beside him, with him. He could not see it.

Make one step. One step only.

He could not make that step.

'I never said that he's a professor.'

No, but you were about to.

It was the tiny voice that spoke. His heart was being clenched within the tightest fist.

So you see, spoke the voice. You *can* remember.

'And I certainly didn't say that he was *my* professor. That's me giving you a point, because he was. But you're right. Lucky guess is a legit possibility, so we haven't really gotten anywhere further. I understand you a little better now, though. I thought I did. Needs a little moment of doubt to actually do. Just a tiny moment, but I can see how this must affect one when this just keeps on lasting.'

She was talking a lot. Aiden sensed the subsiding instance of panic. Perhaps not panic. But certainly the heart missing one beat.

'What's the matter? Something has happened just now, right?'

Aiden had spontaneously decided that he would no longer finish her sentences. Not because it was rude. Because he just couldn't live with it.

'A quake. The strongest so far. I believe. Yes, nothing but a quake.'

'And what was that like?'

'Frightening.'

'I understand.'

'No.' When time is out of joint, language has lost its meaning. It was all Aiden got from it for now.

'No, you don't. You have no idea.'

Jamie, too, had had no idea about James' sexual problems. Not a thing that would occur to anyone knowing James. James was brave, James was flamboyant, he was out there, he was upfront, he had balls. He loved being confrontational, and be it just for the entertainment value. But even the hero weeps. It's just that he does it in private. Unwitting about it, Jamie had James in mind when disapproving, but there was a personal note to it as well, of course. It's one thing to know one's own love will remain unrequited, it's easy to bear when one's longing stays a crush on someone who's in a relationship. It's another to watch how the object of one's desire then violates this relationship with a third party, and it's worse when this third party is a friend. He was already in a bad spot himself, noted late by Aiden during his visit, with his hopes for a stand-up career withering, following two more flops. He bore both these disappointments with the air of the one sober adult in the room, and with thinly concealed scorn.

'I think you got a deal of tidying up to do.'

'I know.'

'Do you? Because right now you two are the assholes in this story. So I suggest you go home and have a good sit-down over this. Normally I prefer to keep myself out of such things, there's enough side-taking and shit as it is in this town, but this is too close to home.'

'Go ahead. I could do with some advice.'

'Yeah, I reckon. What am I, your nanny? Figure it out. Have a think, and figure out the right thing to do. Just do everyone a favour, will you. Don't even start seeing yourself as a victim, a victim of circumstances or such crap. You're not, you're the creator of the circumstances. You're the culprit. Nice of the culprit to show some remorse. Won't cut it, though. Remorse is useless if it isn't followed.'

Part of Aiden had wanted to rebel, to say, 'nice speech'. But he understood that what might have annoyed Jamie the most was his coming here with a pretence attitude. And Jamie had already moved to the hall, waiting there. Basically he was sending him packing for now. Which has about the same impact as an insult.

‘None of it is inexplicable.’

‘I didn’t say it is.’

Uncertainty can be measured by exclamations getting shorter. Miller had arranged for an extension of the session by cancelling an event she was supposed to attend after, and Aiden only mildly wondered how important it had been to her, to find another measure, namely for how serious she was taking this here at this point. Mildly, because no matter what, it *was* more important. It was unclear what extending the session meant, whether it was for another hour, or whether she’d next call home, announcing she’d be late. It was already afternoon, after all. The way everything felt she’d be early.

Miller looked at him in a slightly different way. Everything about her was stiller.

‘You’re about to suggest that we look at it in the light of cold reading. Are you suggesting that’s what I’m doing?’

‘Perhaps not consciously.’ The response was quick. Caught off guard, requiring a work-over. ‘You are fairly alert, you are intelligent enough, and you’re sensitive. Doesn’t take more to correctly guess what’s on the other’s mind. You’re not really predicting events, it’s not as if you’re preparing me for a plane crashing into the high-rise out there.’

‘Not yet. It’s more than what it’s been right until today, though.’

Aiden felt like sighing, as he felt he’d done often before, and knew while sighing that he’d make it an inflection point. It was almost like dreaming. Had it all gone another way, had he interpreted it differently, not the remembering but the creating mind, he could have ended up thinking he was the one building this timeline.

‘These sessions have been a to and fro between you urging me to see it from your viewpoint and vice versa. Probably what serious conversations are all about. And just as with all conversations of this sort there hasn’t been much movement. Your argument is derived from reason, from your whole experience as a shrink, and that’s what is validating it. You’re standing on a foundation of facts and experience, not only professional experience, but an experience of the world, the ground on which you stand. And therein lies the end of your argument, and its fundamental flaw. My argument states that these foundations are no longer valid. That you can no longer use this frame of reference. Truth is a yes or no question. If you’re right, I’m to some degree insane. If I’m right you have no argument.’

Aiden lit himself a smoke, aware of the simple act adding to Miller’s consternation as she’d just been about to draw one from her own pack on the table.

‘In plain terms, you’re like a person hearing about the oddities of time dilation for the first time. Completely contradicting a world view held right up until the moment. Running counter to all experience and intuition. Instantly met with disbelief. My viewpoint states that, unbeknownst to you, you no longer live in a world you can trust, because it is no longer the world you once lived in. It states that your experience has no longer anything to do with it. Your viewpoint states that the things I’m telling you are impossible, because you have always accepted them as impossible within the circumstances of this planet orbiting a star where it does, and at this distance, and being the planet it is, you’ve always accepted it without having to think about it.’

‘So where does that leave us?’

‘It leaves us exactly where we’d begun. I’m asking you to think about it. You’ve accepted that a year lasts for roughly twelve months. For Neptune it lasts a hundred sixty-five times that. You’ve accepted that time will flow the same way at any time, but if we were to fall towards a black hole it won’t.’

‘But we’re not falling towards a black hole.’

‘No. We’re not. But that’s just a variable. I don’t know the cause. I only know the effect.’

‘You’re not moving either, though, do you. From my perspective we at least know the cause of what brought you here, the moment everything changed for you, it’s arriving at the scene of a suicide in progress, it’s watching your friend die from afar, too far to be able to reach him, that’s when it all started for you.’

'I'm no longer disputing it.'

'You're not? Progress at last.'

'I might be wrong, or else getting closer to the Connect helps with pointing at it. It's just that I don't think it has anything to do with it. It was a coincidence, one catastrophe hailing in another, but the two are not connected. Thinking otherwise would be the utmost of solipsism.'

'But here's *my* trouble: it's textbook. Understand at least that where it fits so well with my professional experience I have to give it priority. You making up a much grander catastrophe so the comparatively smaller one won't affect you as much as it otherwise would? Including the guilt? A catastrophe that not merely involves the whole world, but the whole universe, no less. In psychiatric terms, that's what's called a dead give-away.'

'Yeah, just that what affects me with this affects me on an equally grander scale. Incomparable. I may not give the impression, oh shrink, but I'm being dissolved by fear. I'd take the guilt any fucking time. The loss, the grief, I'd take all this any fucking time. I'd take having gone insane any goddamn fucking time. For a relief such strategy would seem like giving me fuck all.'

'Also fits. I'm sorry to say. It's not supposed to work long-term. It's an immediate response to alleviate the worst, but it's not healthy, and unhealthy strategies will come with a toll. That's why you've come to me.'

'I failed.' Aiden shook his head. What had he been thinking.

'With coming here? Not if you consider that we've hardly begun. There's no quick fix to this. Everybody wants a band-aid, even for a ripped-open stomach. That's the church's job.'

'Yeah. Chances are they'd sent me here. They're not good with celestial events.'

'And for good reason.'

What *had* he been thinking. He'd tried understanding it, understanding its fundamentals, but he'd need another lifetime to even get close, and he only had this one, and it would always be the same lifetime. He didn't have another. He didn't have its time. The shrink was just the priest's replacement. Confess, and all your sins will be forgiven. Not with this. Because his sins didn't matter.

'Thank you, doc.'

'Where are you going? Sit down, I haven't cancelled the rest of the afternoon for nothing.'

'Yeah, sorry about that. But this is how far it can go.'

If you fear that you'll look insane a shrink isn't the worst option. The appearance of insanity is mundane to them. There was no question of him trying the authorities. There was no next instance to go to.

'What are you doing? I don't feel comfortable letting you go like this.'

'No need to worry. No need to call the cavalry in white. What would I do? *It* will take care of it.'

Soon no next, anyway. Hell looks worst from its edge. If he was to forget, he'd at least start from a better place.

'You're in one of those moments, aren't you? A quake. Feeling the connect is near? Sit down, will you. You're in a state in which I can't just let you go.'

It was true. Although he couldn't see it, it was just as if it was spreading right before him. That smooth, ice-like desert.

'I'm not a danger to myself, doc. Or to others. Promise. And in the end, chances are we'll meet again. Soon.'

Different from what Aiden thought, Miller's ability to take her clients' vantage point, better than with most of her colleagues, she knew herself, often verged on temptation. She had taken his side, had imagined what would be if he was right. Had driven it as far as her calling had allowed her, and a tad more. Leaning right over the edge, so to speak. Enough for her to having to force herself back. What if indeed. The prospect had scared her, she understood very well how upsetting it was. How frightening time was when understanding it in its extremes, the more so when even *just* understanding it. When at the fringes. And now again she had to shake it off. Pull herself back. As long as she was able to she could still be of help.

Her client, her patient, as she thought of him, had reached a dangerous point. He was far from having begun the work, he'd only just stated his conflict. A malignant complex, like a mental disease, is almost a manifest enemy. It'll fight back. It'll fight *you*. Provisions have locked in to keep things as they are, and the host is a willing accomplice, no wonder it had once been seen as possession. The afflicted will rationalise, will explain things into fitting. Slipping into their shoes is crucial for getting how it is for them, but don't let it go out of hands. Don't start sharing it, or else it'll become a folie à deux.

Miller sat in her armchair for a while, watching the smoke of her cigarette curl. In the end, no matter what. It wouldn't even make a difference. Her patient was in a state, and there was danger, real danger. Had he not said that there wasn't, she'd be on the phone. Since he had she was limited. She had to take matters into her own hands. The angle seemed clear to her. In this whole interaction there was only one ally she could potentially rely on. Unsurprisingly, it was the female angle. Miller got up, grabbed her coat, and flushed herself out the door. A few seconds later she returned to stub out the cigarette butt.

As Jamie had said, Aiden had some cleaning up to do, and with a numb tummy he set out to do it once he'd left Jamie's place. And for a method he had only to look at what James had expressed about free will no longer than a week earlier. For James the camp that proclaims that free will is but an illusion, and that everybody is a slave to their genetic programming, was just as lazy as those who declared a person's life to be fully in their hands.

'The middle ground,' he'd said, 'is once again the more convincing option, as it is so often with anything as amorphous and organic as nature. Never is that simple. Here's how you can tell if the thing you're doing is something you're doing out of free will, and that's probably only a percentage of the cases, it's those where you can be pretty sure. Ready? If you don't like the thing you're doing, but you're doing it anyway, because you feel you have to. There, that's it. When you're going against your own grain. It's like littering. The more *natural* thing to do is to just drop your garbage where ever you walk. And we used to do that. A chimp that doesn't do it has been trained not to. But we've learned that it's a nicer and cleaner world if we'd just refrain from dropping our trash everywhere, so not only have we made the decision, the conscious decision to go against our nature, we have re-programmed ourselves to the point that we'll feel shabby when we dirty our homes and cities, at least those of us who have manners. Same with everything that costs us labour, sacrifice or inconvenience, and yet we may fulfil our duty, renounce on things and face shame, humiliation and discomfort in order to make things happen in specific ways. We're acting out of free will by going against our nature. And it's only ever certain when the thing to be done is uncomfortable. I should make this a pamphlet. Nail it to every tree and lamppost in this town, no other place that'd need it more.'

It was James' conviction that most of the world's ills were due to people making it too easy for themselves. Which couldn't bear well with an increasingly comfortable world filled with comfort-addicts. Ganja as a culture means to not giving a shit wasn't even necessary, opting for the easier solution was, as James saw it, engrained in the human species. Later it would be funny to think back, but Aiden had replied with the first of his own examples he'd come up with, the almost proverbial geezer, more often than not long-haired, wearing a necklace or leather band and his shirt a few extra buttons open, telling more often than not a girl that time was just an illusion, made up by the human brain, to which the only proper response was to ask him, invited or not, what the fuck he meant, other than getting into the girl's panties by means of selling himself as a magic potion-stand philosopher.

This went through his head as he trod along, a pleasant annoyance always being perfect as a distraction when moving towards something unpleasant, but to his credit, he was about to follow James' advice. He didn't want to call, and at first he had troubles finding him. So many places he could be in the early afternoon, including asleep at home. Which is what he tried first, unsuccessfully, though he went through the sickening fantasy of James having spotted him and not wanting to open the door because he already knew. Two friends being mad at him was as bad as it

could be. He tried several pubs, cafés and in-betweens they frequented, to no avail. It became a little odyssey he'd often remember, the whole journey from place to place, all familiar in his familiar town but now strangely hostile looking, all of it as a single tableaux, or a super 8 short film he hadn't shot himself, the film a little overexposed to the bright sunlight, yellowing it, and no sound. Every time he didn't meet James he was a little glad about it, and ashamed about that, and he'd push himself onwards with fervour, gaining speed, so when he finally did find him they almost crashed into each other.

Erica's tight two-storey, two bedroom near the station she shared had been something of a no-go zone without anyone saying it. At James' flat she had always been very hospitable, she was at home there as much as he, and it had always been her to take care of the drinks, hot or cold, first thing, not out of a more traditional role-casting, she just never forgot because of her Southern European upbringing. Both he and Jamie knew where she lived, but she'd never invited anyone over, making James' base her own, and it had never come up. If the address was listed in a special way in Jamie's mind that hadn't come up in Aiden's either.

Erica followed right after James, and Aiden instantly knew that the shit had hit the fan without him in the vicinity, but it was still flying. James looked him straight in the eye, and there could be no doubt about anything, so all Aiden could do was to look back. Of course she'd told him. And of course she wasn't wrong about it. What would he have preferred? To lie to his friend from now on, to treat him as if he was stupid? Which he wasn't, and he'd have breached the topic eventually, or else they'd go on eyeing each other henceforth. Still. This damn honesty at all costs. For her it was a way to wash her hands clean. I've done this, and I told you, so don't bring it up again. If that was it. If that was all. James had come rushing out the door, and Erica seemed in pursuit. Who knows what a strange chase it had been had Aiden not stopped it short.

'I'm not angry at *you*,' James finally and simply said, and began walking around him. Aiden intuitively agreed with the stress on the 'you', and emphatically, but it didn't make it easier.

'Stop.'

'Fuck for?'

'Stay out of this,' Erica flung while rushing past him.

'It's a little late for that...'

'It's nothing to do with you.'

'He and I would disagree about that...'

Why do they do it? How do they do it, driving the blade into one's heart while retaining an air of the least possible responsibility. Aiden's Handbook of Quotable James had an entry about this, too.

Dumbing down matters to evade responsibility was no less than a historical means, he'd said. You exaggerate, blow things out of proportions, when the other is at fault. When you're the accused you respond by accusing the other of blowing things out of proportions. It's nothing. Never you mind.

Are we done yet? And of course everyone's favourite, particularly, James and Aiden agreed as they were men, every man's favourite, 'it's just sex'. There should be a law against saying this, James had said, he collected free speech against which there should be a law, and Aiden had begun his own list.

'Did she tell you why?'

James had stopped and swivelled around, and it happened so sudden there was no way for Aiden to keep it out of his face. So James' turned towards hers.

He shook his head. She was in defiance, there wasn't anything she could have said or done at this moment, and she knew it. He kept shaking it, and then turned back onto his trajectory a little slower than before, letting them glide out of his periphery. They instantly started after him again, but his voice was booming, loud enough for him not to having to turn his head.

'If I could have a *fucking* moment to myself!!'

People stopped in their tracks, looking. Aiden felt a hand on his sleeve. If she hadn't held him back that moment.

You never know with people. You never know how vulnerable they are. A social life is walking on hollow egg shells, and nobody ever thinks about it, lest it'd drive them crazy. A guy he'd known in

his teens, aimless but jolly, always jolly. Took everyone by terrible surprise when he'd jumped off his roof. Later a girl he'd hardly known, part of a group around a glamorous other girl he'd thought he knew better, everyone pretty, everyone flashy and shining, boozing, partying, a lot of drugs. That girl had slightly broader shoulders, and they all only learned from her note that she'd felt she was ugly, felt she was only at the fringe. Doesn't take much. Whether it's a malignant, silent enemy festering for a while, or a sudden hurt, or both. No apparent reason, because the reason can never seem enough to those who're left standing and clueless.

Aiden had remained with Erica because for the moment it had been the closest he could be with James. They'd settled in the breakfast café closest to her house, Aiden staring out the window so he did not have to make the choice between her face and the ugly plaid pattern on the plastic table cover. Drinking bad coffee, as if he needed a faster heart beat. Everything she said was something he could have slapped away from her face before it could go far. It wasn't much, he barely listened, and they soon sat in silence.

They were into their third cups when Aiden said he had enough, and that things won't solve themselves in a coffee cup. Whatever he meant by 'solving'. Erica volunteered to call him. No response. Aiden threw his share on the table and left, half expecting her to stay behind, but she followed him. Together they embarked on Aiden's second odyssey that day.

James' home, bars, pubs. No James. Attempts to call him every now and then. Aiden noticed with angry satisfaction that Erica had begun to doubt her whole it's gonna be alright-crap. She'd grown nervous.

'The cabin,' she eventually suggested. Aiden shook his head.

'Maybe. There's another place. Closer.'

He'd begun leading the way to the seafront and east, to their abandoned non-place that he'd wished to truly become theirs, when Erica's phone rang. She gave him a quick nod to confirm it was him. Aiden watched her frowning, and interpreted it as disgust.

'Can you slow down, I can't... When? How do you know that?'

It dawned on Aiden that it wasn't quite what they'd expected.

'Yes. Alright, yes. We're on our way.'

Aiden would later think that James must have indeed walked the approximate other direction, towards the seafront. Which is why the three of them converted before they even reached the entry path to the dam area. Once the edge of the dam came into view he also understood how James could have known where to go. Vapour rose from the obscured abyss, the noise, they were venting some of the water, as they did occasionally, they'd all speculated about why, with neither of them having much understanding of the related engineering. Not even Jamie. Who they now saw standing on the edge, and on the wrong side of the railing.

They all stopped. They were all out of breath, having hurried out there by bus and on foot. Why hadn't they taken a cab? Because it would have been complicated for a cab to get them this far. Why hadn't they called the cops? Because they hadn't been sure. James had suspected reason for worry when Jamie had called. But he hadn't been sure either. Why had Jamie called him? Because, who else, after Aiden's visit earlier.

Aiden's eyesight wasn't the best, but he thought he saw Jamie mildly smiling as he looked back at them. Smiled, then looked down to his left for a moment, and then dropped. It was unreal.

Completely unreal, as the clearest, most pronounced experience of reality can only be. If there had been no reason to stop when they'd entered the area, there was now no reason to run, but they ran. Aiden had hoped they'd find him clinging, his fingers white, his legs dangling, an utterly unreasonable hope given the way he'd fallen. Jamie was gone. It was just a bare spot along the curving length of the dam. Water vapour rising. And Aiden had fainted.

'You'd left your friend behind. It wasn't so much a quartet as you having left for a new friend. You'd lost touch with him, and so you could not see all else that was going on with him. His pain. His loneliness. Everything that was going wrong. His hopes as a comedian. Perhaps Erica. Women

in general. Always a loner, except when with you. He was a good friend to you. But you never fully appreciated what you had been for him. And when it mattered most you haven't been there for him, even though he was just a few corners away. Everything you three found in his flat later. Everything you learned. And that's what you feel. That's the guilt you feel. That's what you don't want to feel. It began then and there. And with it your event. It's not rocket science, Aiden.'

You never know. You'll only know what you should have known.

When Aiden had lost consciousness he'd seen it. Not as clear and distinct, he hadn't been standing on it. But he'd seen it, out of context, just there, all by itself in the blackness. And what he'd not see again, though knowing it was there, it had shone with dazzling brightness left of centre near the edge closest to him. Too bright to make out a shape, if it had a shape.

He is seeing it now. The whole of it, spreading before him, limits where no limits should be. It's something he shouldn't be able to see. Something he's not supposed to see. Maybe that is why. He now recognises the mountains. They're the mountains that had always been there. The rolling hills, each summit right there, they'd seen them every time.

He's standing on Jamie's spot. Once again they're venting. Once again the vapour rises. Strange to think. Jamie had been here for a while after he'd called James. Had he wanted them to be there? When you are decided does it make it easier? Was it selfish of him? And what if it was. It's such an absurd notion. What *are* the thoughts of a man about to end? Can he know? Can he ever know? Miller is right, it had begun then. Just not because it was here. And not because of him. Two wrongs coinciding, one small and insignificant, the other, out there, and of consequence, and no one will ever know what it had been. Maybe the next time, though.

'Hey man, what you're up to?'

He knows how this will end.

'Erica called you?'

'Your shrink's with her. I was just closer. This time.'

'I call that a breach of confidentiality.'

'You should sue her.'

'Yeah.'

'Can't do that from there.'

'That's true.'

'Why don't you come down. We talk.'

'We can hear each other, all right.'

'Then, what's on your mind? You know I'll listen.'

'Don't patronise me.'

'I don't. When have I ever not listened? You're on the edge of a..., what is it, 170, 180 ft drop, you sure got my attention. Especially here. I'm here for you. Always have been.'

'Except you haven't, though.'

Aiden isn't sure if James understands. He isn't complaining. 'You' is being meant as 'we'. He wants to add the clarification, but hesitates.

'I wanted to call. Come by. You know I wanted. Wasn't sure if you wanted me to. Should have made sure. It felt as if you were angry. Like you didn't want to see either of us.'

This much is true. He hadn't.

'Should bring out the best in us. But we aren't good, are we. I misjudged the situation, with him, with you. Had I known the state you're in...'

'The state?'

'Erica tells me you've wrapped yourself into some kind of obsession? You seeing a therapist...'

'The state of mourning a friend? I think I did alright in that department.'

James nods. Aiden is able to see his brain working, and he knows exactly what he'd say next.

'I'm not suicidal.'

'That's good. So there's no need for you to be up there...'

'It's just gonna work out the way it will. Novikov.'

‘Novikov? I’m not sure if I...’

‘Jamie would have understood. He was the most educated of us.’

‘That he was. What’s going to work out?’

Aiden still sees it. All the way to the tall hills. Everything, every detail, every word has been spoken, has been seen, but there is a limit to what can be known to him. Even this close, it’s but a mere moment. He knows the outcome, and he can tell the coming motions, but he can’t see how they’ll line up, line up to eventually lock.

‘I wanted to understand. Him up here. How someone can...’

‘How someone can want it all to end? It’s probably impossible to understand unless you’re being there...’

‘No. No, that I understand. That I understand all too well. I want this to end. Can’t go on forever, can it...’

‘Aiden, come down from there.’

‘You misunderstand. You don’t know. Don’t come up here.’

‘Then tell me.’

‘Would take hours, my friend. Been through this with my shrink, see how well *that* turned out.’

‘We got hours. We got all the time in the world, as they say.’

Aiden’s frustration has set in a full ten seconds before James had used this commonplace phrase, with nearly five of them already hearing them. It’s unbearable. His hands are up at his temples as if conducted by a will not his own, that, too, something he’d known, something he has no control over.

‘That’s the bloody point! We have, and we don’t have! We don’t have now, and we will have over and over, but we won’t *know*...!’

His hands have glided over his eyes, depriving him of most of his vision, barely enough to see movement on the far right in the distance, where the path joins the asphalt lane leading onto the dam. Two figures. Distracted, he can’t mind James, even though he knows every particle culminating to the spectacle, an actor forced not by passion but compulsion. James grabs for his legs through the banister, and impulsively, compulsory, he withdraws it from his friend.

He’d heard a shriek. He now hears steps running from the right through the noise of the gushing water. He’s hurt his right hand as he’d been grappling for a hold, abraded some skin, and his right shin, somehow. Now his grip on the arm is slipping, so is his friend’s, down to the wrists, both hands around each others’ wrists. And in sets the strain, the terrible strain of his own weight, in his arm and in his shoulder.

‘You got to help me. Aiden.’

Aiden brings his left hand up to the rim, only for it to slip right off again. His feet can’t find anything.

‘Aiden. Help me...’

The load is in his friend’s voice. The incredible weight, the growing weight. There are two faces appearing above the banister. He knows them, but he only sees those eyes.

‘It’s okay...’

‘Help me, man...’

They are so close. Closer than they can be. Right before his.

‘It’s okay. We’ll meet again.’

And he lets his hand go limp. Rests it on the side of his friend’s arm.

‘What are you doing...?’

‘It’s okay. It’s okay. Let go.’

He won’t let go. Not in a million years. But he will let go. Down at the very last second.

‘It’s okay...’

The eyes had fallen away. His friend’s face had faded into the white of the vapour. He’d felt no weight. He’d felt no motion. Only watched the world withdraw.

It expanded right before him. It should have been but an image he created, but he did not care. The mountain range, the tall hills, were still there, but they had faded. All was still here, where time was not and could only be seen. A shaft of light, golden to him, and two others, fainter, barely visible. The point he could not see, but it was there. The fabric was distorted, so slightly, so mildly, and it looked afield, though it was right in front of him. He stood on the plane, and he could go wherever he wanted. Into the light. He chose not to. But moved onto the point because he had to. Because now there was no other law than what the new law had created.

October 30th, 2020

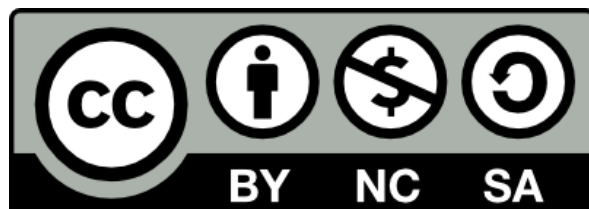
Acknowledgement:

for raising my awareness to persistent psychogenic déjà vu thanks and credit go to Christine E. Wells et al for their case report:

<https://jmedicalcasereports.biomedcentral.com/counter/pdf/10.1186/1752-1947-8-414.pdf>

*‘Speak loudly of your pride and bitterness, but softly,
say that she does not love you, tell me simply!’*

- Edmund Rostand, ‘Cyrano de Bergerac’, Act II, Scene 8



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>